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Vol. LXXV.

THE DREAD SHOT FOUR;



By
BUFFALO BILL

OR
MY PARADS OF THE PLAINS

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The Dread Shot Four;

OR,

MY PARDS OF THE PLAINS.

A Romance of Wild Careers and
Heroic Manhood in Dark
Days Camp.

BY COLONEL WM. F. CODY

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN OF NERVE.

"One thousand dollars for the man, dead or alive!"

"Two thousand, I say!"

"I raise you a thousand, pard!"

"Four thousand, say I!"

"Five thousand!"

"Six!"

"Hold!"

Every eye in the Friendly Glass Saloon, in the Dark Days Mining Camp, turned upon the man who had uttered the command.

A motley crew was that, in the Friendly Glass Saloon—men whose hands were blood-stained—men as desperate as wounded wolves—many who were seeking fortune by gold digging—many who sought to win one by chance on the turn of a card.

Then, good men were there, but in the minority, for the desperado and tough ruled in Dark Days Mining Camp.

But, that one word and the peremptory tone of its utterance commanded silence.

The one who had uttered it had just entered the saloon and made his way to the bar, where he called for a glass of liquor, but before drinking it had turned toward the crowd with seeming interest at the excited discussion going on, and had heard the offers made on a human life.

Observing the man, all saw that he was a stranger in Dark Days Camp, and yet he had coolly chipped in and enjoined silence in an authoritative manner.

The crowd present beheld a man in dark blue velvet, the pants stuck in top boots, a sombrero upon his head, and with an air at once independent and courtly.

He stood six feet in height, had massive shoulders, small feet and hands, and beardless face, so that every feature was seen to be cast in a perfect mold, his teeth milk white and even, his eyes large, lustrous, and dreamy in expression.

He had a belt about his slender waist, but his velvet sack-coat hid what weapons he carried, though all knew they must be there.

Who was he?

What was he?

Who knew him?

From whence had he come?

These questions were mentally asked, but no person there could have answered them.

The unknown met the crowd's scrutiny unflinchingly, and a silence of several moments followed.

"You are betting your money on a man's life, I believe?" spoke the stranger.

A chorus of voices answered in the affirmative, and one called out:

"I'll tell you how it is, stranger pard, for yer looks ther out and outer gent."

The unknown bowed at the compliment and replied:

"I simply heard that it was a stake put on a man, dead or alive, and if it is the one I think, I shall have something to say, too."

"It's just this, stranger," added the man who had volunteered to be spokesman, "this is a gold diggers' camp—a hard one, maybe, but ther is yellow dust to be had for the digging, and fortunes has been made here, and lost, too, but cards has lost 'em, mostly."

"Now, we don't squeal at losing by a

squar' game of cards, but we does shout ag'in' bein' robbed, we who works hard for our gold; but, robbed we is—yes, and shot down, too, all by a gang of outlaws that calls themselves ther Scarlet Scouts.

"Who they is, no one knows, but they knows ther ins and outs of Dark Days Camp, and every few days they swoops down upon a miner's cabin, or holds up a coach, or tackles a wagon outfit, and gits what they wants.

"They don't kill if no show of fight is made, but if a man has pluck to try and defend his gold, then they shoots ter kill."

"And you cannot trace them at all?" asked the stranger.

"No; for they has a man for capt'in who is cunning as a fox, bold as a grizzly, and as dangerous as a rattlesnake, and it's his head we was setting a price on when you chipped in, stranger pard, fer if we could git his scalp the Scarlet Scouts would have to go out of the robbing and killing business."

"That was what I heard, and why I chipped in, as you call it, for I believed that you were putting a price upon the head of Captain Rainbow."

"That's the man, stranger. We calls him capt'in Rainbow because he wears a white sombrero, red coat, blue pants, and yellow boots, but the redskins calls him Skeleton Face, as he wears a mask that is just like a death face."

"Yes, I know his reputation well, and I will tell you, my friends, that no man has come to know the scoundrel better, and when he dies I will be in at the death, mark my words, for where he goes I shall go!"

"What I hold against him you need not at present know; but I tell you now that whatever sum you raise to put against his life, I will meet it right here and deposit the money with the keeper of the Golden Gate Inn, next door."

"Now, let the good work go on. Name the sum raised, and I'll cover it for the body of Captain Rainbow, dead or alive."

The unknown, as he spoke, took from about his waist a belt of buckskin that was wadded with bank notes, and threw it upon the bar, the act causing the crowd to break out into a wild cheer for:

"The Man of Iron Nerve!"

CHAPTER II.

THE PRICE ON A LIFE.

That the new-comer had "caught the crowd" there was no denying.

Strangers in Dark Days were not often allowed a fair show by the lawless element; but this man had put up his money to talk for him, and therein had shown nerve and purpose which commanded respect and admiration.

That Captain Rainbow had something to do with his coming to Dark Days no one doubted, and each one asked, mentally:

Had the robber chief wronged him beyond forgiveness? or, was he a Government detective on the trail of the outlaw?

"Count up your stakes and name the total. I will match it," was the stranger's repeated injunction.

Those who had called out their offers stepped to the front. They were then seen to be the heads of mining cliques numbering from five to ten men each, each one representing a well-paying lead, and who could afford to pay the money offered to wipe out the rapacious outlaw band.

The person who had addressed the stranger was the landlord of the Golden Gate Inn, and "he knew how to keep a hotel," speaking in the slang of the day.

His rough manner and border dialect seemed to be more assumed than natural, and when once asked about it, his reply was:

"Experience has taught me when in Rome to do as the Romans do."

"Count the stakes put up, Landlord Claggett," said the unknown, turning to him.

This Dave Claggett proceeded to do. Calling each man who had offered, he wrote down the sum put up, and, turning to the stranger, said:

"I has not the honor of knowing yer name, sir."

"Belden,—Frank Belden."

"Waal, Pard Belden, ther sum to go inter ther miners' pool is just twenty thousand dollars cold, if my figgerin' is correct, and I guesses it is."

Then count out of that roll of bills, landlord, a sum to match it."

The crowd cheered; the money was counted, and there lay upon the bar the large offering for a human life; Forty thousand dollars!

This made the stranger "solid" with the denizens of Dark Days Camp, and Landlord Claggett called out:

"As I understands it, this whole stake goes to the man, or men, who brings inter our camp ther outlaw chief, Rainbow, dead or alive?"

"That is just it, landlord. It is a fortune for the man who captures or kills Captain Rainbow, the Outlaw of the Skeleton Mask," returned Frank Belden, as the new-comer had called himself.

Another cheer followed, and then a miner called out:

"I bet one thousand that the stake is won within six months."

To the surprise of all the stranger answered:

"I'll take that bet, sir, for I am a Man of Chance, and bet for the pleasure it gives me."

The miner did not back down; the money was put up, and the next injunction of Frank Belden was received with delight, for he called to the crowd:

"Gentlemen, step up to the bar, all of you, and take something with me."

The something was "Blue Grass Elixir" straight, and never had the tumbler of Friendly Glass Saloon been more eagerly filled or more enthusiastically emptied.

The "all around" had hardly been finished when the crowd nearest the door gave way, and the men began to doff their hats.

The stranger, surprised at the act, glanced toward the door, to behold a woman enter the saloon.

All noticed at once that Frank Belden seemed strangely impressed as he gazed intently upon her—that he placed his hand to his forehead, as though in deep thought; then, turning to the bar, he ordered in a low tone:

"Give me another drink!"

The bottle and a glass were placed before him, and he hastily poured a second drink, dashed it down at a swallow, and walked quickly out of the saloon, the eyes of many following him.

The woman who had entered at once made her way to a table in one corner, where no one was seated.

As she took her seat, her back to the wall, and facing the crowd, she was seen to be of marked beauty of face and grace of form.

Scarcely over twenty she looked, and her costume was most striking, being a riding habit of red broadcloth, and a sombrero of the same gorgeous hue, both embroidered in gold.

A black plume was pinned in her sombrero with a diamond star of rare brilliance, and her wealth of black hair hung in two massive braids far below her waist.

"Who is she?" the stranger had whispered to a man as he passed from the door.

"Kid Glove Kate, ther Gold Gambler, we calls her, for she always wears them gauntlet gloves yer see," was the answer.

CHAPTER III.

KID GLOVE KATE, THE GOLD GAMBLER.

Having taken her seat at the table, the young woman placed before her a leather handbag that appeared to be heavily loaded.

Without removing the pair of hand-

some gauntlet gloves which covered her hands, she unlocked the bag and took out a pack of cards, after which handful after handful of twenty-dollar gold pieces were piled upon the table before her.

Each pile contained a hundred dollars, for the woman sport never played for less than that sum, though she had no limit in her heavier bets.

The woman—girl, I might say, from her youthful appearance—was a gambler, pure and simple, and, like all professional gamblers, had her striking peculiarities—one of which was that she only played for gold. She would neither stake paper nor silver money on a game, nor would she receive a dollar in winning that was not of the same precious metal, whether it was coined or not.

Who she was no one knew. She had arrived in Dark Days Camp one day six months before the opening of this story, coming by stage from the eastward, and had put up at the Golden Gate Inn.

Purchasing a pair of fine saddle horses, she having brought a side saddle with her, she next hired some men to build her a cabin several miles from the camps, and there she made her home as soon as it was ready for her to move into.

It was a comfortable cabin of three rooms, situated delightfully at the entrance to a large canyon, and commanding a most extensive and beautiful view.

With the canyon mouth fenced in, her horses had a good grazing ground; a stream was right at her door, and wood in plenty nearby, which she had employed cutters to pile up for her in abundance.

The coaches had brought her furniture and other things to make her comfortable, and alone she took up her abode there, a month after arriving in Dark Days Camp.

Warned about living alone so far from other habitation, she had replied that she could protect herself from all foes.

Why she had come no one knew. She was an object of curiosity to all, and of suspicion to not a few, for what her coming meant was to them a mystery which might mean much when it was solved.

She had registered at the Golden Gate Inn simply as
"Kate."

To this had been added the prefix of "Kid Glove," for she was never seen without her gloves, playing cards in them with a dexterity fatal to many a miner's pocket.

She had one night, just at twelve o'clock, entered the Friendly Glass Saloon, invited the crowd to drink, and, to the surprise of all, dashed off a glass of whisky straight with the rest, after which she engaged a table in one corner as especially her own, and challenged any man present to a game of cards with her.

She had a faro table cover with her which she spread over the table, a small wheel of fortune, a dice box, and packs of cards, and was ready to play any game to oblige her adversaries.

The fact that she would bet and play only for gold gave her the title of the "Gold Gambler," and it was not long before Kid Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler, became known to all in Dark Days Camp as a very dangerous manipulator of the cards or dice—that the winnings were on her side three times out of five; but that she always played a fair game no one could deny—her nerve and skill telling in her favor, no matter whether it was poker, faro, euchre, or any other card play.

When she had come to Dark Days Camp she had dressed in black, and usually went closely veiled; but upon entering her home she cast aside her sombre garb and appeared in a pretty house dress of gray and slouch hat, but wore the crimson habit and sombrero when she came to the camp, by day or night.

Alone she lived, doing her own work, looking after her horses, and killing her

own game, for the mountains abounded with game of all kinds, and she was a dead shot with shotgun, rifle, and revolver.

Only one man had dared visit her in her lone abode, and he had not repeated it, for he had been given one minute to get out of sight, and not hurrying quite enough to please the Kid Glove Sport, a rifle bullet had clipped off a piece of his ear!

He had told of his adventure, but she had not spoken of it.

Soon after she had guarded her cabin in two ways—one being by the possession of an immense mastiff, presented to her by Dave Claggett, and the other by a line around the entrance to the canyon, while here and there were placards with the warning:

"DEAD LINE"

"All visitors cross this line at peril of life."

With such a warning, visitors to the home of the altogether mysterious woman were wanting.

When in the camps the woman sport was courteous to all, and her beauty, her pluck, and the mystery hanging over her caused her to be a universal favorite.

Such was the woman whose coming into the Friendly Glass Saloon had so impressed the stranger, Frank Belden, and apparently had caused his hasty departure, as though to avoid being seen by her.

CHAPTER IV.

AN INSULT RESENTED.

Kid Glove Kate was in a winning mood, and, as a miner remarked:

"The cards are all going her way."

Her smile was a fascinating one, yet dangerous, if analyzed, for there appeared a glitter in it rather than sunshine.

She had a low, musical voice, and manners that charmed; yet those who studied her ways understood that a claw was hidden beneath the velvety exterior.

She would never gamble by day, only by night, and, though often seen dashing about on one of her fine horses, she was always alone, never caring for companionship.

When in a gambling mood she came at midnight to the saloon, hitched her horse near the door, entered in her graceful manner, played one hour or two, always permitting her adversaries to choose the game.

Winning or losing, her face never changed, and in the end of a series of games she invariably won.

Only once had she lost heavily, and then had appeared in the same humor as though she had won.

One drink she took each night, never more, and contrary to her custom of "playing a lone hand," as the miners expressed it, as far as society went, she always invited the crowd to join her, making not a single exception, so she was a good patron of the Friendly Glass Saloon. In fact, her going there had made it the assembling place of the camps.

Of course, she had won men's hearts by the score, and what lovely woman does not? but the poorest and humblest man in the mines received the same attention from her as the richest miner, and manly beauty did not attract. If she had the slightest preference for any one, not a soul had yet found the fact out.

"I stake my last dollar this time on that card, Kid Glove Kate, and I tell you now if it don't win, then you is a sharp, and when a woman plays false she is worse than the worst of men; so here goes, and you has heard what I has said!"

The speaker was the man who had visited Kid Glove Kate in her cabin and received, as his welcome, the mark of a bullet in his ear.

He had told a few intimates of the affair, and they had told others, until the camps knew the story, yet he was not one to joke with, and few spoke to him about it.

He had shown no difference in his treatment of the woman because of his rebuff, was as polite to her as were all others; but those who knew Brace Barnes best were sure that he would neither forget nor forgive that chip in his ear.

He was a handsome fellow, and particularly vain, so his pride had been humbled when he could make no impression upon the woman.

The visit to her cabin had been the result of a bet that she would receive him, and that he had lost his wager did not add to his equanimity.

On this evening he had taken more drink than was his wont, luck having gone against him at the boards, and he had sought the table of Kid Glove Kate for a game of faro, hoping to retrieve his losses.

But his ill fortune clung to him, until at last he said what he did, tossing a small buckskin bag of gold upon the table as he uttered the words.

The crowd about the woman were positively startled by his words. They looked at the man in indignant amazement, for no one had ever before hinted that the kid-gloved woman did not play a "dead-square" game.

They looked at her to note the effect of the speech; but save a slight flush that rose to her cheeks, she showed not the slightest offense at the remark.

Her gloved hands dealt the cards with her usual grace and skill, betraying not a tremor of excitement or apprehension.

The gloved fingers turned the cards out of her little golden box as if not a word had been spoken.

What if Brace Barnes lost?

Soon the cards had run their gamut, and Brace Barnes had lost his last dollar.

Every eye was upon him now, and he could but feel his position. He had recklessly spoken; what would be the result?

The woman was the first to speak, and she said, with the utmost calmness, as she looked the man straight in the face:

"You have lost, Brace Barnes."

"Yes, my last dollar."

"I would have staked you to play again had you asked it?"

"Will you now?" he eagerly asked.

"No!" decisively spoken.

"You wish to resent my words?"

"You said if you lost I played false—words that you must eat, Brace Barnes!"

"I retract nothing I has said."

"Then you shall answer for them."

"I answer to a woman? Well, that is good, says I."

"You answer for them, or you drop dead in your tracks!" and Kid Glove Kate suddenly leveled a revolver full at the insulting face.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE DUEL.

It was a most critical moment. Brace Barnes had insulted the fair Gold Gambler, and had been brought to book by her.

Many men there would gladly have championed her cause, but dared not interfere, after her act.

Into the saloon had stalked a striking-looking quartette, while the game was going on.

They had halted at the bar, dashed down a glass of liquor, and apparently recognizing no one, nor being recognized by any one, they had pressed forward to where the crowd was thickest, around the table of Kid Glove Kate.

Drawing near, each one had seemed struck with the almost weird beauty of the woman, as well as amazed at beholding her in that wild camp and tough saloon.

They saw Brace Barnes throw his bag,

of gold upon the table and heard his insulting words; but they kept silent. They watched the game through to the end and made no comment.

But when the woman so suddenly covered her insulter and uttered her demand, one of the four forced his way to the front, and, facing her, said:

"It is not for you, miss, to shadow your life by killing a man; but, as he has insulted you, I will resent it!"

Every eye was now turned upon the speaker, whose presence before had hardly been noticed—turned to behold four strangers in their midst.

And such strangers! A finer quartette of magnificent manhood would be hard to match the world over!

All were tall, splendidly formed, and dressed alike, in buckskin, top boots, and slouch hats.

The hair of each fell upon his broad shoulders; the face of each was a study and commanded admiration.

The one who had acted as spokesman was the larger of the four, and his face was one never to forget, so clean cut, determined, and fearless was it.

He had taken off his sombrero when he spoke to Kid Glove Kate, and showed marked respect in tone and look—the courtesy due a woman wherever found.

He seemed indifferent to the gaze of the crowd, yet there was no bravado in look, manner, or word.

The woman seemed startled, almost, as she beheld the stranger, and her voice faltered slightly as she replied:

"I thank you, sir, for your courtesy, but I can take care of myself, and I mean what I said—that that man shall answer to me, or I will kill him where he stands."

"I know nothing of the quarred, miss; but neither my pards here nor myself are men to allow a woman to be insulted and not resent it. We are strangers here, but I will take this quarrel off your hands."

The reply of Kid Glove Kate was distinctly pronounced:

"Again I thank you, sir, and your comrades; but I came here to accept what I found, and I do not claim any exemption because of my sex. Brace Barnes must answer to me."

"Bah! don't be a fool, Kid Glove Kate, for I am not a man to turn a gun on a woman; but I will face this gamecock who has took up your quarrel so neat," retorted Barnes.

"There is no quarrel between you and this stranger; it is between you and I; so eat your words as publicly as you uttered them!"

"That I won't do."

"Then you shall meet me face to face, so choose your second!"

"Does yer mean I is ter fight you in a duel?"

"That is just what I do mean."

"I won't be no such fool."

"Then I shall be so cruel as to shoot you in your tracks."

"Ask the crowd if I should fight a woman."

"I shall ask no one. You insulted a woman, and now you are coward enough to fear to meet me!"

"I hain't no coward!"

"Then fight!"

The man looked bewildered, for he did not know what the crowd would think. Then he saw that the woman was implacable; something in the glitter of her eyes told him she would kill him.

"Quick! decide, or I pull trigger, Brace Barnes!"

"By Heaven, but I'll meet yer, Kid Glove Kate, for you'll kill me if I don't."

"Again I ask to take this quarrel off your hands, miss," and the handsome stranger drew closer.

"No, it cannot be, shall not be! But you may be my second, sir, if you will."

The crowd appeared dangerously silent. All were in a quandary as to just what to do. They wanted a leader, but none spoke.

Only the tall, striking-looking stran-

ger appeared as the fair gambler's defender.

"See here, Kid Glove Kate, you have brought yourself down to the level of man, and I'll meet yer, because you gives me no chance. I'll take chances in this, as I does in cards. Just load one revolver; leave tother gun empty, and then we'll draw for weapons. Then we'll stand ten paces apart and face ther music."

This plan the woman agreed to, and the stranger second of Kid Glove Kate and Dave Clagget saw to the loading of the one weapon, the unloading of the other.

The woman won the first choice, selected one revolver without hesitancy, took her stand, as also did Brace Barnes, and her second gave the word to fire.

Brace Barnes fired first, but fired high, purposely to miss, did his weapon hold the ball; all could see that.

The woman raised her weapon slowly and said:

"I will spare your life, but I will brand your other ear, Brace Barnes."

With the word her revolver cracked, and her bullet cut through the ear of the man!

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEAD SHOTS.

As the bullet cut through his ear, Brace Barnes quickly raised his hand to his head, while an execration broke from his lips.

At the same instant a shout arose from the crowd, but whether in admiration of the woman's nerve, her faultless aim, or for sparing the man, who would have spared her, had his revolver held a bullet, no one could say.

Stepping up to the wounded man, one of the quartette of strangers had said:

"Allow me to dress your wound, sir, for I am an army surgeon!"

Brace Barnes would have resented the offer, but for the last words, which gave him a clue as to who the strangers might be; so the miner-tough yielded in silence.

The words had been heard by many, and whispers were going the rounds that one of the four strangers was an army surgeon, and this information appeared to strike a number present with alarm, to judge from the way that they quickly departed from the saloon.

Dark Days Camp had too many fugitives from justice for an army officer to get a unanimous welcome there.

The one who had acted as the second for the woman was turning, with the others, to join the surgeon, as the four seemed anxious to keep together, when Kid Glove Kate called to him.

He at once approached her, and, holding out her gloved hand, she said:

"I thank you, Wild Bill, for the service you rendered me in this affair."

The man started, but said quickly:

"It was little I did for you, miss; but I am not one to see a woman insulted and let me tell you that you took big chances, for many a man would have shot to kill even you, with the dread of your turn to follow, for you are a dandy to send a bullet where you aim."

"But, you called me by name, miss."

"You are Wild Bill, the Scout?"

"You are right, miss, and I am not ashamed of my name or occupation. But I fail to recall having met you before."

"Your memory is not so good as mine, then, for I can also name your comrades."

"Indeed?" exclaimed the surprised scout, gazing at the beautiful sport in a vain effort to recall her.

"Yes, the one who is pressing Brace Barnes's wounded ear is Surgeon Frank Powell, of the army, and also known as the Surgeon Scout, while the Indians

*J. B. Hickok, army scout, and one of the most famous of bordermen—a life-long pard of mine and comrade in many a wild adventure.—The Author.

have given him the name of White Beaver."

"You have the doctor down fine, miss."

"The one on his right," continued the fair gambler is Texas Jack,* a man with a record and a scout with few equals."

"You know him, miss, and no mistake."

"Another one is Night Hawk George,† brother to your surgeon pard. He is a man to tie to, as they say out here, so a stronger quartette of men never went on a trail together, only you have come too late."

"Too late?"

"So I said, Wild Bill."

"I do not understand you, miss. Do you, pards?" and Wild Bill turned to Surgeon Powell, Texas Jack, and Night Hawk George, who had just then approached him.

Bowing courteously to the woman, the Surgeon Scout replied:

"I heard the lady say that we had come too late, but am at a loss to know what she means."

"Ditto me," echoed Texas Jack, in his light way, while Night Hawk George Powell asked:

"Too late for what?"

A strange smile passed over the face of the beautiful woman, and she replied, as the crowd about her listened in deepest silence and interest:

"You came too late, gentlemen, to bag your game, for he has just escaped you."

"Who has?" demanded Wild Bill, abruptly.

"Captain Rainbow, the Chief of the Scarlet Scouts."

"Has he been here in your camp?"

"Yes, here in this saloon, and not an hour ago."

"Who saw him?"

"I did!"

"And did not denounce him?"

"I did not know him until he had gone. He was here when I came, and, seeing his face, it came back to me like an evil dream of the long ago."

"When again I sought to find him he had gone, and then, suddenly, it flashed upon me that even in his disguise I knew him—that he was Rainbow, the Outlaw Chief."

"Did no one else see him?"

"Yes, Wild Bill; all present here saw him; aye, more: the miners raised a purse of twenty thousand dollars for his body, dead or alive, and he matched the sum and put up the money. Yes, gentleman, you came too late," and Kid Glove Kate's face was stern as steel as she uttered the words, particularly addressing Wild Bill and his Dead Shot Pards.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRICE ON A LIFE.

The words of Kid Glove Kate were heard with surprise, not alone by Wild Bill and his three comrades, but by all gathered in the Friendly Glass Saloon.

They came like a thunderclap from a cloudless sky, and men looked at each other with wonder and suspicion, for who else of those there had known that the handsome stranger, calling himself Frank Belden, and who had himself doubled the big reward offered for Captain Rainbow, dead or alive, was the outlaw chief himself?

Was it really true? and how was it that Kid Glove Kate knew the identity of the outlaw, if no one else did?

The evening had been one of surprises and excitement, for into the saloon had come the stranger, whom the young woman asserted was Rainbow, at the very moment a purse was being made up for his head, dead or alive, and when Kid

*J. B. Omohundro, a Texan, who won fame as a scout in the Confederate Army, and after the war became a plainsman of the Northwest. He was also one of my closest comrades.—The Author.

†George Powell, a brother of Surgeon Frank Powell, and a thorough man of the border. Now he is a distinguished citizen of La Crosse, Wis., of which city Frank Powell is mayor.—The Author.

Glove Kate had entered he had been seen to dash off a glass of whisky alone and leave the saloon quickly.

Then had followed the affair between the woman and Brace Barnes, broken in upon by the entrance of the four newcomers, later recognized as a quartette of the best scouts and deadliest shots upon the frontier.

They were identified by Kid Glove Kate, who had informed them that their game had slipped away, implying that she knew their coming was to capture Rainbow, the Outlaw.

Little wonder, then, that men looked strangely at each other and questioned what it all meant.

Wild Bill was the first to break the silence.

"You can vouch for it, miss, that the man who was here a short while since was Rainbow, the Outlaw?" he asked.

"I can, most certainly, sir."

"You know him, then?"

"Yes, I know him."

"He was disguised when here to-night?"

"So completely that I could not recall his face for some time."

"In what way was he disguised, may I ask?"

"In his dress, for one thing; and then he had his beard cut off, leaving a clean-shaven face, and his hair was worn long, all of which completely changed him."

"How about his voice?"

"I did not hear him speak to-night, only caught sight of him as I entered the saloon, and when I looked for him again he had left. Then I knew him."

"You doubtless have had some good reason for remembering him, miss?"

The intimation caused the woman's face to flush, as all saw; then she became very pale; but answered in an unmoved tone:

"Yes, he robbed me of—a fortune!"

Whatever the crowd might think, Wild Bill and his three comrades felt sure that the girl gambler had not given the correct answer, but they made no comment, and Wild Bill, still acting as spokesman, said:

"Will you describe the man?"

This the woman did minutely, showing that she had keenly scrutinized him, even at the flash glance she had taken.

Then the man standing by the stranger when he saw the woman enter told how quickly he had left the place at sight of Kate.

"Well, gentlemen, the one described by this lady was surely Rainbow, the Outlaw Chief of the Scarlet Scouts, as we happen to know, for word came to us that he had taken passage on the coach coming to Dark Days, and in the disguise that has been described.

"We at once started upon his trail, hoping to find him here, but upon our arrival to-night ascertained that he had hastily ordered his horse and ridden away.

"Unable to follow, feeling that he had in some way had notice of our coming, we gave him up for the present."

This accounted for the presence of the four army men in Dark Days, and some present breathed more freely, for guilty consciences had been distressing not a few at sight of the Border Knights. Well every man in the camps knew their iron nerve, their dread aim, and their indomitable courage, and that they were a terror to all evil doers.

"May I see the purse put up to-night on the head of the outlaw chief?" asked Surgeon Powell, addressing Kid Glove Kate.

"It is not in my keeping, sir; but Landlord Clagett will doubtless show it to you."

"Indeed, I will!" and the money was taken from the strong box. This the Surgeon Scout and Wild Bill looked over carefully, and the former remarked:

"It is all there, indeed. He is a bold man, to put a price upon his own head."

"Permit me to add to the price on his head. Dave Clagett, put ten thousand

of the money you hold of mine with the other, making it fifty thousand!" said Kid Glove Kate.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FATAL RECOGNITION.

This offer of Kid Glove Kate brought a wild cheer from the crowd, and for a moment the hum of voices in eager conversation was heard all over the saloon.

"Revenge prompted that offer, Bill," remarked Frank Powell to Wild Bill, in a low tone.

"Sure, Doc; but she's too clever to tell the secret she holds, and she'll be about as hard to find out as Rainbow is to catch," responded the Surgeon Scout.

Turning to Kid Glove Kate, Wild Bill continued:

"You are generous, miss; but I think the price now offered should get Captain Rainbow."

"Will you try for it?" she asked, quickly.

"Why do you wish to know?"

"Because, if you and your three comrades try for that big money, Wild Bill, it will result in the capture of Rainbow, the Outlaw, and his band."

"You are complimentary, miss; but, army men don't work for outside pay or blood money, nor would we accept the reward if we earned it."

"Then you refuse to take the trail to win it?" she asked, eagerly.

"To win the money, yes; but to capture outlaws is our sworn duty, and whatever we can do, that we will do. But, we take no trail simply for blood money. Duty, not hope of reward, brought us here to-night, and, having failed, our game having escaped us, we will return."

"You give up more readily than I supposed men of your calibre would."

"We know the obstacles in our way, and cannot expect to capture that clever fox by advertising our intention. Either from knowing our purpose in appearing here or by reason of the recognition of yourself, he departed, and, with a full night's start, such a man can readily cover up his tracks. Still it's a long lane that has no turn, and we may yet capture him, if some one else, lured by the fortune on his head, does not bring Rainbow in, dead or alive."

"Some one must do so, Wild Bill! That man will yet hang, and I will see him die! I feel it, I know it!" she said, with a fierceness of manner that surprised those who heard her speech.

"Well, you have heard the old saying, 'if you cannot get pudding take pie'; so our coming is not useless, for there is some game here which we will run to cover!" and wheeling quickly, Wild Bill stepped toward a table where four men were playing cards, and, leveling his revolver, cried:

"Hands up, men!"

The four had seemed little interested in what was going on. They were seated at a table near to that of Kid Glove Kate, and their position was such that one would think their backs had been purposely turned toward the four scouts.

They were roughly clad, had long hair, wore their sombreros pulled down well over their eyes, and were, apparently, busy in their game, oblivious to all else about them.

But, the keen eyes of Surgeon Powell had just taken notice of them, and he had, with a whispered word to Wild Bill and the others of his party, kept so between the four at the table that they could not leave it without having to face one of the scouts.

When Wild Bill spoke and advanced toward the table, his comrades were at his back, their hands upon their weapons, while their eyes swept the saloon searchingly.

At the command, a groan broke from the lips of one of the four card players, and he dropped his head upon the table, the picture of despair.

Two of the others quickly let fall their cards and raised their hands above their heads, as ordered.

The fourth suddenly bounded to his feet with the cry:

"No! You don't hang me, Wild Bill, for I fight it out right here and now! So, up, pards! and don't be cowards!"

He had faced Wild Bill, a revolver in his hand, his face livid with fury.

But, ere he could pull trigger, and for once Wild Bill was caught off his guard, as the man was in a direct line with Kid Glove Kate, there came a sharp report, and the shattered hand dropped the revolver!

With a cry of rage the wounded man dashed into the crowd, drawing another weapon as he did so, and leveling it quickly.

Two shots followed, almost together. One was fired by the desperate man, and his bullet cut through the end of Wild Bill's long mustache; the other shot Wild Bill himself fired, and the ball was buried in the brain of the ruffian who had so nearly taken his life.

So quickly had all happened that the excited crowd had merely swayed to and fro.

The three men at the table still sat there, one with his face still buried in his hands, for the revolvers of Surgeon Powell had covered them, and Texas Jack and Night Hawk George were protecting the rear.

The voice of Wild Bill was then heard: "Who fired the shot that broke that man's arm? Who was it?"

"Kid Glove Kate fired it," cried a voice in the crowd.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "BLACK BUTCHER."

Kid Glove Kate it was who had given such an exhibition of her deadly aim and nerve.

Turning to see that the other three men were not dangerous under the cover of his comrades' revolvers, Wild Bill's intention was to at once frankly thank the woman for the great service she had rendered him.

But her chair was vacant. No one was at her table, and Kid Glove Kate was not to be seen.

"Where is that remarkable woman?" he asked of Dave Clagett, who now was at his side.

"Gone, pard; gone to her home, I guesses."

"Does she not stop at your hotel?"

"You bet she don't, for she's got a cabin in the mountains, and lives there all alone, only a dog for a pard and protector."

"But, has she gone there, do you think?"

"Yes; she went out at a quickstep after she pulled trigger on that fellow, and as her horse was right at the door, she's well away by this time."

"But, what is yer quarrel, pard, with Soldier Sam and his pards?" asked Clagett.

Wild Bill turned to Frank Powell, who then came up, and said:

"Surgeon Powell can tell you, sir, and perhaps some of the crowd should know, for I see ugly looks on some faces."

"We have the three secure, Wild Bill," Surgeon Powell announced, and to the crowd he continued:

"Those men were army deserters, from a post far south of here. They have the crime of murder added to that of desertion, as they fired upon their pursuers and killed two of them."

"We have been on the lookout for them, as we were told they were in the mines, and as an officer of the army, I shall take them to the fort as prisoners."

"If you kin do it."

Dr. Powell turned half around, at this speech, to behold close at hand a huge negro, a Black Hercules, in fact, whose attitude was at once a menace and a defiance.

It was the camp terror, known as the Black Butcher. Six feet four in height, with massive shoulders, a giant frame, long arms, and huge hands, he had not

his match for strength in Dark Days Camp.

He was a negro, without the slightest trace of white blood in his veins.

Who he was or what he had been no one knew.

He had come into the camp months before, and had shown himself so well able to take care of himself that he was let severely alone.

Soon after, in tramping through the mountains, he had found gold, and it was said that his find was panning out well.

Of this no one cared to question him, but he certainly had plenty of gold dust to spend and gamble away, which he did freely.

Black, he had said, was his name, and it was as appropriate on account of his blackest of black skins as was the later addition of Butcher.

Surgeon Powell looked him over coolly, but made no reply. He saw no reason to enter into an argument with every desperado who differed with him.

Seeing this, "the Butcher" betrayed his ugly mood.

"I said if yer c'u'd take 'em to ther fort; but, maybe yer can't," the Hercules growled.

"Very true; we may not be able to do so, as you say, my man," and Surgeon Powell turned away, wishing to avoid trouble.

As he did so the negro stepped quickly after him, as though to drop his hand upon his shoulder; but, suddenly, Wild Bill slipped between him and the Surgeon Scout, who evidently believed the matter at an end, and he said in his quiet way:

"Stop where you are, Nig!"

CHAPTER X.

THE ENCOUNTER.

The crowd was silenced in its noisy hum, and every one gazed upon the man who had dared step in the path of the Black Butcher.

All were sure that Wild Bill would be hurled across the saloon by the giant, if he was not killed, for on the sable face was a look of ferociousness that riveted every eye.

The black did not put his hand toward the four revolvers he wore in his belt, and neither did Wild Bill make a motion to draw a weapon.

The contrast between the negro and the scout was marked, for "the Butcher" was a head taller, and, in appearance, he weighed nearly a hundred pounds more than the noted Dread Shot.

Wild Bill did not move a muscle, not even when the two huge hands went upward and the negro intended to grasp him in his savage clutch, while he hoarsely shouted:

"White man, yer don't know ther Black Butcher, ter git in his way. I'll crush yer!"

The hands descended, and the crowd swayed wildly.

All save three men in that large room expected to see Wild Bill literally crushed to death, unless he used his revolver instantly, and in "a draw" the black was as quick as a flash.

But, the huge hands did not fall upon the scout's broad shoulders, they did not get their iron grip; but were struck upward with terrific force by a blow of the scout's powerful left, while his right was driven full into the face of the Hercules, the stroke sounding like the report of a revolver.

Nor was this all. As the negro's hands dropped under the blow, and he was sent reeling backward, Wild Bill leaped forward, grasped the huge form in his powerful arms, and hurled him upon the dirt floor with a force that would have shattered the bones of one less strongly built.

The negro lay like one dead, the scout standing over him, presenting a striking and most thrilling tableau.

The crowd for a few seconds did not

realize what they had seen, what the scout had done.

They had wondered that Surgeon Powell, Texas Jack, and Night Hawk George had not fired on the ruffian, to protect their pard.

The men of Dark Days now apprehended the reason—the pards of Wild Bill felt no fear of the result; they knew their man.

Instantly, it was understood that the giant had more than met his match; then a roar broke from the crowd that nearly raised the roof.

It was a shout of admiration, of triumph, of delight.

"The Butcher" had been mastered, and by one whose strength was phenomenal, as was his courage.

"Three cheers fer Wild Bill!" shouted Dave Clagett.

They were given with a will that was overpowering, for bordermen know how to yell.

The dazed negro heard the roar; it seemed to arouse him from his stunned condition.

He moved, rose to a sitting position, and gazed at Wild Bill.

The latter stood ready to receive him, whatever his intention might be.

The black slowly rose to his feet, still watching the watchful scout.

Then he spoke:

"Yer cud hev kilt me ef yer'd wanted ter."

"I did not wish to."

"Boss, I knows when I meets a master. You is master, and I axes yer pardon, sah!"

"I won't fergit yer, boss, fer yer has writ yer name in capital letters all over me."

"I axes yer pardon, sah."

"All right; it's granted, and no more to be said about it," and Wild Bill extended his hand.

The negro grasped it, turned quickly, and walked toward the door of the saloon, followed by a jeering laugh.

He paused and half turned, and silence followed, broken by Wild Bill's voice:

"None but cowards jeer at a man when he is down!"

The silence could be felt for an instant. It was broken by the negro.

"Boss, I thanks you! You downed me, but they hasn't, and Dark Days Camp is whar I hangs out."

With this half defiance, half challenge to the crowd, "the Butcher" left the saloon, not a word or a laugh following.

"Landlord, care for the body of that poor fellow, please. We will look after the three prisoners," said the Surgeon Scout.

He and his comrades left the saloon, the prisoners accompanying them, and sought quarters for the night in the Golden Gate Inn.

CHAPTER XI.

LOAFER DICK'S PARD.

The Friendly Glass Inn was never closed. A man was behind the bar always, to give a friendly, or unfriendly, glass, as the case might be, to the thirsty gambler who played until dawn, or to the wayfarer belated, or to the early riser.

After the scenes of the night, so eventful even for Dark Days Camp, the crowd began to discuss the happenings as soon as the four army men had left the saloon.

The quarrel of Kid Glove Kate with Brace Barnes was touched on in whispers, for the latter, after his wound had been dressed by the Surgeon Scout, still remained in the saloon, silent and watchful of all that followed. He had retired to a corner and apparently was asleep.

Then the deadly aim of the woman gambler, in her shot at Soldier Sam, was talked over, with praise for her pluck and skill, and also for the nerve of the four army men.

Wild Bill and his comrades were voted "trumps," and it was greatly regretted

that they had not put in an appearance in the camps before Captain Rainbow had taken his departure.

If the four army pards took his trail, the men of the camps felt assured that the Scarlet Scouts and their chief would soon be run down; but the "Army Quartette," as they were often named, were to go back to the fort the next day, and take their prisoners with them.

There were men in Dark Days who would have been glad to save those three prisoners from their fate, but the risk was too great against four such guards as the Dread Shot Comrades.

Thus the night passed, the miners dropping out in twos and threes as they finished their games, drinking, or chatting, until near dawn the saloon held only one party of four at a table, the now solitary bartender on duty and two forms asleep, one being Brace Barnes in his corner.

Presently a man entered, looked over the saloon before he ventured beyond the door, and then walked toward one of the sleepers in the corner and awoke him.

The sleeper looked up, gave a start, and accepted the invitation:

"Come take somethin'."

The newcomer wore long, bushy hair, a heavy beard, had his collar turned up, as though he was cold, and his hat was pulled well over his eyes.

The other was a well-known camp idler by the name of Loafer Dick—a man who lived by his wits, and they seemed to be bright enough to carry him through.

Barney, the bartender, gazed at the newcomer attentively. He knew most every man in the camp, but could not place this one.

He set up the liquor and glasses, got his money, and renewed his comfortable seat for a nap, until the next thirsty denizen should drop in.

Loafer Dick and the unknown went out of the saloon together, and as soon as the door closed behind them, came the words:

"Why, cap'n, you are taking big chances in coming here again, and Barney looked at you mighty close."

"Bah! No one would recognize me. I came to know about those four men."

"They are army men, one of them an officer, the Surgeon Scout."

"Ah! Frank Powell, eh?"

"Yes, sir, and Wild Bill."

"The devil you say!"

"Yes, sir, he is a devil! And Texas Jack."

"Worse and worse."

"And Night Hawk George."

"Dread Shots, all! and the worst four men to tackle I know of."

"I should think so, after what they did here to-night."

"What was it?"

Loafer Dick told the story of the night's happenings, and the other listened with deepest attention.

"So they killed one of the deserters, and start with the other three to the fort?"

"Yes, sir, that's the programme."

"It is some comfort to know that they leave. Yet they shall not reach the fort, I swear. But I will have to ride for it to prevent them."

"They are bad men to tackle, cap'n."

"I know just what they are; no one knows better."

"Now, as to that woman, Kid Glove Kate. Does any one here know anything about her, or why she came to this camp?"

"Nobody knows, cap'n, I don't think."

"Oh, yes; I know!"

Loafer Dick looked surprised, but made no remark, and the "captain" said:

"Come in and have another drink and then I must be off. I am glad to find you when you were useful, and so keep it up. Stay right around here and have your ears and eyes open."

"I expected a messenger from you, cap'n, so stayed in the saloon so late. But, don't go in there again."

"Nonsense! I love risks," and he led the way to the bar.

Another drink was disposed of, and Loafer Dick escorted his companion outside, saw him mount his horse and ride away, after which he returned to the saloon to finish out the night.

"Say, Dick, who was your pard?" asked Barney.

"Don't know, Barney, fer I couldn't place him to save my life. He treated me to two drinks, and then rode off."

"I know him, and if you chip in with me we'll bag him some time."

"I'll do it; but, who is he?"

"Captain Rainbow, the Chief of the Scarlet Scouts."

CHAPTER XII.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

The Four Dread Shots did not rise at a very early hour the following morning, for they seemed to be in no hurry to leave Dark Days Camp.

The Golden Gate Inn could give very fair accommodations, for good pay, and they had the best, for Landlord Dave Claggett was anxious to be on the best terms with the army.

Dark Days Camp was seldom visited by the army people, or by any one else save the few who came there by the weekly coach on business with the mines, and time and again the stage came and departed with only the driver, Hal Hutchins, and the mails, and the gold dust it often carried out-bound.

The three prisoners had been secured beyond escape, and were placed in the room with Texas Jack and Night Hawk.

They had been accorded the same comforts their captors enjoyed, and were on hand in the morning when wanted.

Breakfast over, and the burial of Soldier Sam attended to, Surgeon Powell gave the order to start, horses having been secured for the prisoners.

Few miners were about when the start was made, and of this the Dread Shots were glad, for they had rather feared a rescue might be attempted just at that time by some of the camp toughs.

Instead, however, a number of men came up and shook hands with the three prisoners and wished them well, and a cheer was given their captors as a send-off, in token of admiration for the part they had played so well the night before.

In fact, the men of Dark Days had certainly behaved well toward the army party, considering what had been reported as to the utter lawlessness of the place.

So, away rode the prisoners and their captors, taking the stage trail until they came to where the one to the fort branched off, some dozen miles away from the camps.

As they reached the fort trail, Wild Bill, who was riding in the lead, with Surgeon Powell, said:

"Ah! more trouble yonder!"

Surgeon Powell followed the direction in which he pointed, and saw suddenly come into view a horse and rider.

"It is 'the Butcher,' and I guess he has comrades with him," said Wild Bill.

It was surely the Black Hercules, mounted upon a large horse, as black as his rider's ebon face.

The picture was a sombre one, but the negro made no show of hostility. Instead, as the Dread Shots halted, suspecting a trap, he raised his hands above his head and rode slowly toward them.

Halting near, he called out, addressing Wild Bill:

"Boss, I want ter see you."

Instantly the scout rode forward, and said, pleasantly:

"Well, sable pard, what is it?"

"Cap'n Rainbow and his gang is ridin' hard ter git ter the river and head you off. I knows and comes to tell yer. Jest how I knows, never mind, boss, but I tells you no lie. It's straight. So jest keep yer eyes open! Good-by, boss!"

And unheeding Wild Bill's call, he wheeled his horse and dashed away.

Calling to his comrades, he repeated,

in a low tone, what "the Butcher" had stated, and then said:

"We will ride for it, Surgeon Powell, to cross the river before they get there—Jack and I with the prisoners, while you and Night Hawk cut across to the trail they must take, and if they have passed follow them; if not, wait until they go by, and you can get a good view of the gang."

"The very thing, Wild Bill," assented the Surgeon Scout.

This being decided upon, the party separated and immediately went on their respective trails.

Convinced that the negro had told him the truth, Wild Bill led the way at a rapid gallop, the three prisoners following, while Texas Jack brought up the rear, and after a rush ride of twenty miles the river crossing was reached.

The Scarlet Scouts had not put in an appearance, but, listening attentively, afar off the sound of rapidly approaching hoof strokes was heard.

"Quick, Jack! We'll cross the river; then you push on with your prisoners to the fort. Darkness is coming on, and I will halt on the other bank, and play my repeating rifle upon them for all it's worth."

Across the stream they hastened, and while Texas Jack rode rapidly on with the prisoners, the dauntless Wild Bill halted on the stream's bank, his rifle in hand, ready for deadly work.

The sounding of hoofs grew louder, and soon, in the gathering gloom, a dozen horsemen appeared in sight.

Straight to the river they rode, and a voice called out:

"We are here ahead of them, men! So we'll cross and lie in ambush in the pines there!"

Hardly had the words been spoken when, without warning, Wild Bill's deadly repeating rifle began to pump lead into the ranks of the Scarlet Scouts.

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT TO BE DRIVEN.

Wild Bill, not a man to throw a shot away, now fired to kill, well knowing that the Scarlet Scouts would be merciless, did they get any of the army scouts in their power.

These outlaws had possession of the country; their daring, skillful, and merciless chief, known as Rainbow, the Skeleton Face, had become a public dread. He had struck the army wagon trains alike with the mining camps and stage coaches, and had so played his hand that he never failed to win; so his booty must have enriched every member of the band.

The fort had all it could do with its small force to keep back the hostile redskins from sweeping the country over with torch and scalping knife, and the miners dared not venture far from their camps in a hunt for the desperadoes of the trails.

Thus matters stood when Wild Bill and his comrades, Texas Jack and Night Hawk George, had planned to go upon the trail alone to ferret out the Scarlet Scouts, and that decided on, Wild Bill sought the advice of Doctor Frank Powell, the fort surgeon, yet known as a plainsman of matchless skill, daring, and cleverness.

It was therefore a pleasant surprise to the Chief of Scouts at that post to have Doctor Powell say:

"I will go with you, Wild Bill, if you accept me as an ally, and not in my capacity as an officer."

"Why, doctor, I am more than delighted, sir," was the glad response.

"I have been entitled to a leave for some time, Bill, and I will spend it on the trail with you; but, remember, I go as Frank Powell, the scout, and not as an officer, save that I will be your surgeon when needed. You are to command; I am your ally."

"Doctor Powell, with your aid we have got them!"

"Don't be too sure, for this Rainbow

is an exceptionally able leader; he has a thoroughly disciplined band—a numerous one, if all reports are true; so the odds are immensely in his favor, as I see it."

"I know all that, sir; but once we find his lay-out, my band of scouts can match the Scarlets, man for man."

"Of that I am sure; but, who goes with you?"

"Your brother, Night Hawk George, sir, and Texas Jack."

"A better trio could not be found from Fort Peck to Fort Sumner."

"Say a quartette, sir, as you go along."

"All right, the Dread Shots Quartette, if you so please to call us, for such, I surmise, we will become to the infested camps and trails."

It was arranged and the Dread Shot Four soon left the fort, well equipped for their dangerous man hunt.

Striking the stage trail they ascertained from the agent that he had just discovered that a man who had gone through in the coach to Dark Days Camp was none other than Captain Rainbow, the outlaw chief, in disguise!

Instantly the trail was taken to Dark Days Camp, and with a result already recorded.

Now to return to the scene at the mines, where, in the early twilight the dauntless Wild Bill had brought the Scarlet Scouts to bay.

The outlaws had not discovered the dark object on the other shore, and were about to ride into the stream when the lightning-like flashes illumined the waters, and with each report a horse went down or a man toppled from his saddle.

In a few seconds, as it were, they were piled up in a mass of struggling men and horses, the former trying to seek shelter from the fearful rain of lead.

So rapid was the fire, indeed, and so deadly, that not a shot was returned, and a stampede was sure to ensue, when the voice of their chief steadied them, showing that he had not been touched. He had taken in the whole situation and was, as usual, quick to act.

"Come, men, but one man is firing yonder. Ride for him, all who are able!"

Wild Bill heard the command distinctly and said grimly:

"I must still hold my ground, for Jack will get that much further away. So here goes, Mister Rainbow, for some more fun!"

CHAPTER XIV.

LYING IN WAIT.

The Scarlets who followed their chief were over a dozen in number, as Wild Bill plainly saw, but that discovery did not send the intrepid scout flying for his own safety. Not that! The Dread Shot was on his mettle now!

Retreating to the shelter of a large tree, Wild Bill skillfully reloaded that murderous rifle, then again let it "talk"—each crack a defiance and a death warning.

In the gathering gloom he could take no accurate aim, yet he did not fire at random. His aim was at the centre and rear of the group, not at its head, for he did not wish to kill or wound Captain Rainbow, because, then, the outlaw chief would be swept away by the rapid current.

"I want him for future reference," he reasoned.

The Scarlets seeing a man drop here, a horse there, opened fire with their rifles, aiming at the flashes of the solitary gun, and upon the big tree's body flattened several bullets, but the tree being over four feet in diameter, almost perfectly protected man and horse, the chances against Wild Bill being when he leaned to one side to fire.

A bullet did cut his sleeve, but his arm was not touched.

The outlaws dared not pause now;

they pressed on. When they were quite over the stream, keeping right in the range of the tree, Wild Bill began his retreat.

This movement was not seen; but, as he had ceased firing, the outlaws came to a halt, to be prepared for what might be a trap.

One mile away and Wild Bill dashed along the trail at a sweeping gallop after Texas Jack and his prisoners.

"We must ride for it now, that is sure. If overtaken and compelled to halt, Surgeon Powell and Night Hawk, I opine, will be heard from before we are wiped out," thought the scout, as he sped along.

In half an hour he came upon Texas Jack at a standstill.

"Why did you not push on, Jack?" he demanded impatiently as he dashed up.

"The firing was too hot back there, Bill, for me to enjoy having you take it all while I was in safety, so I was going to tie these fellows to a tree and go back to help you."

"We must prevent their escape, Jack, at all hazards."

"Better lose them than lose you, Bill."

"All right, old fellow, we'll stick together. But, come, we must ride on to where we can get a good place to stand them off, for our horses are about used up."

"Right for you, pard. But you remember the old rock pile in the valley five miles ahead?"

"The very place! Just fits us. We'll push for it," and the scouts and their prisoners went on at a rapid gallop.

Two of the horses ridden by the prisoners showed unmistakable dead beat signs, and, though all were tired, the rest could have held for a further long gallop.

The rock pile was a mass of stones in a small valley, and upon the bank of a stream. Its history, no one knew, other than that it was the sepulchre of a number of human bones, a dozen skulls telling that a like number of men had met their deaths there.

Not just the most cheerful place to take refuge, but certainly a good one for a stand-off, and with Surgeon Powell and Night Hawk George free, it was the refuge to be sought.

The rocks had been collected from the banks of the stream and piled up in a circle, ground being thrown up against them upon the outside.

Through a hole in the wall on the stream side, water could be dipped up, and with provisions in plenty a siege could be fought out for some little time.

This fort was about ten feet in diameter, but to protect the horses was the question. That was solved, for by hobbling the five animals and throwing them, then pinning them down with lariats, they were below the line of fire, although it left but little space for the men.

The three prisoners, bound securely, were seated with their backs against the wall, while the two scouts were on the watch.

Time passed, and Texas Jack had just remarked that the outlaws must have given up the pursuit, when the sound of hoofs was heard and Wild Bill cried:

"Here they come now!"

"Let 'em come!" answered Jack; "we'll give them a ripping welcome!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE STAND-OFF.

The valley was a rugged one, almost treeless and grassless, and the trail to the fort, sixty miles away, wound along to the stream crossing some hundred yards from the pile.

With keenest of eyes, the scouts could see the party of horsemen, over a dozen in number, they decided, while yet some distance away. They were riding in a gallop.

"We'll wait until they reach the turn to the ford, Jack. That will bring them in good range, whichever way they go."

"All right, Pard Bill. But, suppose they should not be the Scarlets?"

"Ah! that is something to consider, though I fail to see who else they could be, unless they are miners whom Doctor Powell has collected to come to our rescue—hark!"

One of the party of horsemen was speaking, and his words distinctly reached the scouts' hearing.

"They cannot be far ahead, unless they left the trail and dodged us. We must catch them, men, or this country will be made too hot for us."

"That settles it, Jack! Now, let them have it! Are you ready?"

"Ready!"

"Fire!"

The rifles flashed together, and two saddles were emptied simultaneously.

The outlaws drew rein as though they had ridden against a stone wall.

But, almost instantly, the voice of their leader was heard:

"They are in that old rock pile, men. Follow me!" and he wheeled straight toward the rocks.

But, two barriers were in their way—the rifles of the Dead Shots and the uneven ground, all water worn.

The leader saw that the men would not face the fatal music of the undaunted scouts' rifles, for several had fallen from their horses, while the animals were frightened by the singing bullets and were quickly unmanageable.

So a retreat was called, and back out of range the Scarlets hastened, scattering as they fled.

Silence followed—deep silence. Five, ten, fifteen minutes, and no sign of the outlaws.

"They doubtless think we are all here, and so they'll lay siege to us," Jack observed.

"Let them! It'll be a jolly dance for them. But, I hope, Jack, we did not hit the chief. He is a special pet of mine."

"So do I; but, as he ordered the retreat, I reckon he is all right. But I say, Bill," and Texas Jack brought his voice down to a whisper, "did you notice that young fellow during the fight?"

"The youngest of the prisoners, you mean? No; what of him?"

"Why, he deliberately stood up, as though he wanted to be shot."

"No!"

"He did, indeed! I saw him just as the outlaws retreated, and when I looked around he quickly dropped down again."

"It is a wonder he was not killed, the way the bullets flew over the wall."

"It is, indeed. I feel sorry for him, Bill."

"So do I. It would have been better for him if a bullet had entered his heart."

"Yes, better than hanging. But, do you remember how utterly crushed he was when we held them up in the saloon?"

"Yes; he seemed to break all to pieces, and dropped his head upon his hands as disconsolately as though he had been a woman."

"That's what he did. He is a very young fellow, hardly over twenty-one. I wonder he passed muster when enlisted."

"So do I."

After a short silence, Wild Bill said:

"I am going to ask him about himself, for he has not spoken since we made him a prisoner, and I am greatly interested in him."

"As I am, Pard Bill," answered Texas Jack, as his comrade turned to where the prisoners sat in a group, and called out:

"Say, young man, I want a few words with you."

"Well, sir," and the young deserter arose to a standing position and faced the scouts.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE YOUNG DESERTER.

Rising to his feet, Wild Bill stretched out his hand and aided the young deserter to come nearer to where he and Jack

sat, for with his feet bound it was difficult for him to move.

"Sit there, young man."

The prisoner obeyed.

"I wish to talk with you."

"Yes, sir."

"You are rather young for a soldier."

"I am twenty-two, sir."

"You look younger, almost boyish."

No reply.

"I guess you would rather have been an officer than a soldier."

"I had no desire to enter the army in any capacity, sir."

"Why did you do so, then?"

"Pardon me if I decline to say."

"Not liking the service, then, you deserted?"

"I did not desert, sir."

"You did not desert?"

"Not intentionally."

"Your name is Alfred Aldrich, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were stationed in the southwest at Fort R—?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are reported, with Sergeant Samuel Carr, Robert Ross, and Leonard Sawyer, as having deserted nearly a year ago from Fort R—, and, being pursued, you and your comrades turned at bay and killed two soldiers, thereby making your escape. You were reported as making for the mining country, and Surgeon Powell, who had served with your regiment for a few months, recognized Ross and Sawyer, and your description and that of Sergeant Carr also fitting, we felt we had the four deserters, and so demanded your surrender."

"Yes, sir; it is true, and Sergeant Carr was killed by you, though he brought his death upon himself. I wish now that I had resisted and been killed also."

"You said just now that you had not intentionally deserted, and if you can prove that it may not go so hard with you, especially if you did not fire upon your pursuers."

"I can prove nothing, sir, or rather will not. I shall have nothing to say, but accept my fate as it comes to me," was the low response of the prisoner.

"Well, I hope it may go light with you, but, feeling an interest in you as both of us do, I deem it my duty to tell you that you will have to face two very serious charges, of desertion and murder, and you should, if you can do so, prove all that you can to show your innocence."

"I will do nothing, sir, say nothing, but face the alternative in silence. If the court-martial can prove me guilty, so be it! I was with the others when they left, and when the soldiers in pursuit were fired upon, so have no favors to ask."

"Good for you, young fellow! You are not such a softy after all!" cried one of the soldiers across the little rock fort, for both of them were listening to what was being said.

"If you think I would save myself at your expense, you do not know me, that is all," replied the young soldier, turning upon his deserter comrades.

Without further remark Wild Bill arose and aided the young deserter back to a seat by his comrades.

"Thank you, sir!" was all he said.

Motioning Texas Jack to follow, Wild Bill leaped out of the rock pile and walked a short distance away, scrutinizing their surroundings most carefully.

"Well, Jack, what do you think of him?" he asked.

"Led astray."

"You think that the others influenced him?"

"Yes."

"I know that he deeply feels their capture, for he showed it, and more—he seemed to be greatly moved by the death of Sergeant Carr, who was his particular pard among the lay-out."

"He groaned and groaned when you killed Soldier Sam, as the miners called

the sergeant, and gazed at his dead body in a way I shall never forget."

"Well, Jack, if we can do so, we must save him, for you remember his words, that he would not save himself at the expense of the others."

"Yes, that is what he said."

"And more—that he would make no defense, accepting his fate in silence."

"That was it."

"This testimony may save his life, at least."

"I hope so."

"Well, we will go back into our little fort now, and be ready for what turns up, for I expect those fellows to charge us at dawn."

"If they do all of them will not get into the fort."

The two made a circuit of their little fortress, and then returned to their posts, where they were about to take their positions to be on the watch, when Texas Jack stepped quickly to where the prisoners were lying down, and eagerly bent over them. Then he called out:

"Bill, one of the three is gone!"

With a bound the Chief of Scouts was by the side of Texas Jack, and bending over he cried:

"One gone, by the dogs of war!"

And so it was.

The young deserter had fled.

CHAPTER XVII.

REVEALED BY THE DAWN.

"Come! No playing possum!" cried Wild Bill to the two remaining prisoners.

The men pretended to have been just awakened and looked about in seeming surprise at not seeing their fellow-prisoner.

Examining the hands of the two men, and finding them all right, Wild Bill demanded:

"How did your comrade escape?"

"Escape? Who escaped?"

"Oh, you cannot deceive us. How did that boy escape, I repeat? Speak up, or I'll mighty quick gag you!"

This frightened the men.

"He slipped his bonds off his feet and hands and got through that hole. That is the last we saw of him," and the man pointed to the hole in the wall, which was over the stream.

"I cannot believe that he could free himself without help."

"If you had looked at his hands and feet you could see how he did it. Why, they were as small as a woman's."

Texas Jack picked up the two ropes, just as they had been slipped off.

"Why did he not free you?"

"We wouldn't go."

"Tell the truth."

"Well, you came back just then, and he skipped through the hole."

Both scouts well knew that in the darkness the young fellow was gone beyond recapture. If he joined the outlaws, as he would most certainly do, he would tell them that but two men held the little fort, while Surgeon Powell and Night Hawk George were then watching them.

"Well, Jack, we must do our level best now, so take your stand and keep your eyes open."

"I'll do it, Bill, to the end!"

"And if you men attempt to give us trouble, when the outlaws charge us, I'll settle you very quickly, with a couple of shots," warned Wild Bill.

"We will give you no trouble, Wild Bill."

"It would be foolish, when we know that the Scarlet Scouts would soon rescue us, and, though we are not of their kind, they would help us because we, like themselves, have a rope about our necks."

"Well, don't be too certain, for the Scarlet Scouts have not rescued you yet."

The conversation was dropped, and the two scouts took their respective places to watch and to wait.

The night wore slowly away, and at last the gray light of early morning began to brighten the eastern horizon.

Silent and watchful, Wild Bill and Texas Jack crouched at their posts, their eyes scanning the plain about them, and turning an occasional glance across the stream.

Grayer and grayer became the skies; then there appeared, close to the horizon's rim, the slightest tinge of red.

"Light will soon enable us to see, Jack."

"Yes, Bill, and I'm mighty glad of it."

Just then there came to their ears a dull, muffled sound—the sound of hoofs.

It was not in the direction of the charge of the night before, but where the ground was unbroken, and men could ride at a run up to the very rock pile.

Louder and louder sounded the hoof-falls, and Wild Bill said:

"Jack, there seems to be more of them than last night."

"Yes, but we will have light enough to pick our men and throw no shots away."

"Right, old fellow! but don't forget those prisoners, for they may give us trouble."

"By Jove, I'll tie them back to back before the Scarlets come," and Texas Jack sprang to the side of the prisoners and began to carry out his threat, when Wild Bill cried:

"You have not time! They are riding right down on us!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHARGE OF THE SCARLET SCOUTS.

When Surgeon Frank Powell and Night Hawk George started upon their trail, they as well understood its danger and difficulties as did Wild Bill.

They started with the intention of finding the Scarlet Scouts, for not once did they doubt the negro's story of what they might expect from the outlaws.

Both men were apt readers of human nature, and they set down the act of the Black Butcher as having been instigated by two motives—admiration for the man who had mastered him and gratitude at his having spared his life.

Reaching the trail the outlaws would have to pass along to reach the river and head off the army scouts and their prisoners, Surgeon Powell very quickly discovered that the outlaws had not yet passed along.

"We are ahead of them, George."

"Yes, and we will go into hiding here until they pass."

"Yes, and follow in their rear, for if they should head Wild Bill off we will be needed."

Going to a thicket not far from the trail, the brothers awaited patiently as Indians would for the coming of the outlaws.

Just what the Black Butcher had reported they intended doing, to attempt the rescue of the three deserters and to wipe out the scouts, at the same time, was just what Surgeon Powell felt sure they would do.

Captain Rainbow had been in Dark Days Camp in disguise, that was certain, and as he had left the Friendly Inn so hurriedly, the Surgeon Scout surmised that, in some way, through a spy, doubtless, he had heard of their coming, and that he was their intended game.

This would account for his wishing to attack them, when he had his band at his back, while he might also have learned of the capture of the deserters, and so would desire to rescue them.

In fact, he most surely must have heard of it, by his riding with his men to head the party off.

Did the Black Butcher, knowing of the movement of the outlaws, as he certainly did, mean that he was one of the band?

That was a question the brothers could not answer.

They had not been long in their hiding place before they heard the approach of horsemen, the hoof-falls echoing loudly over the hard ground.

"There they are."

"Yes, and they number up well."

"Count them."

This was done, and fifteen horsemen were seen to pass by at a gallop.

After a little while the two scouts were about to follow, when they caught the sound of other hoofs approaching.

Quietly they waited, and soon five more riders passed.

"A rear guard, George."

"Yes, a reserve ordered to follow, and if they strike Wild Bill they will need to supply vacancies in their ranks. We will go now."

On they went, and when the fight at the ford was going on, they drew up dangerously close to the outlaws.

But, neither made their presence known by a shot. They could tell that Wild Bill was all right, and if he needed them they would be near.

The fight over, they could hear the orders for the men to go into camp and look after the wounded and dead.

Thus an hour or more passed, when the two scouts, who had crept up on foot perilously near to the camp, distinctly heard Captain Rainbow's order:

"Mount men, and we'll push on after them now, for they will think we have given up the chase."

"Come, George, we will cross below and follow."

"I wish we could flank the outlaws now, and get with Wild Bill, Frank."

"We cannot, but we will be near when wanted."

And so it was that they were near when the night charge upon the rock pile was made and the outlaws were so gallantly beaten back by the two Paladins of the Wilderness.

The brothers were near when the outlaws went into camp, to await the dawn, and then charge again.

They saw the men mounting in the gray of dawn, saw them ride away, and as it grew lighter they beheld just ten outlaws following their chief.

"Why, Frank, the chief has a moustache and short hair," said Night Hawk George.

"Yes, but it is a disguise, surely, for when he went in the stage he had long hair and was beardless, but be ready, for we must open when our pards do from their little corral, and I only wish we had some one on that hill over yonder to fire upon them, too, for we could then catch Rainbow and his men in between three fires."

"I wish we had; but this is a boss place we are in, and within easy range," replied Night Hawk George.

And he was right. They were upon a hill on one side of the valley, among large boulders, that well protected them, and not three hundred yards from the outlaws, then passing them.

"Ha! there they go!" cried Surgeon Powell, and as he spoke the chief led his men into a gallop, the bridle of every man in his teeth, a revolver in each hand, and their red sombreros and scarlet jackets flashing in the first rays of the rising sun.

As the Scarlet Scouts charged hard upon Wild Bill and Texas Jack in their little rock fort, Surgeon Powell said to Night Hawk George, as the two crouched among the boulders, rifle in hand:

"See there, George! A rifleshoot from that very hill across the valley where I said I wished we had a friend to aid us! Who under Heaven can it be?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

What Surgeon Frank Powell had wished for, it had become—a triangular fight, with Wild Bill and Texas Jack in the little rock pile, holding out for their lives—half a score of Scarlet Scouts, revolvers in hands, reins in their teeth, led by Captain Rainbow, charging upon the two men at bay, the surgeon scout, and his brother, Night Hawk George, on one flank, stationed among

boulders on the hill, and across the valley, upon an impregnable steep, an unknown ally who had opened the fight with a shot from his rifle that had emptied a saddle.

For a moment the outlaws seemed to have things all their own way, and it appeared as though they must ride down the two daring scouts.

But, to their surprise, came the shot from the cliff on their right, under which shot one of their number dropped dead.

Then followed two shots from their left, from the boulders, and a man and a horse went down.

Into their face then streamed a fatal fire from Wild Bill and Texas Jack's repeaters!

Brave as he certainly was, and reckless, Captain Rainbow knew when luck was wholly against him, and quickly came the order:

"Wheel and retreat, men!"

As though on pivots the disciplined horsemen turned to the right about, but their flight was under a shower of bullets.

Four of their number were left on the field and half a dozen horses, but the dismounted men sprung up behind comrades and thus they swept up the valley out of sight.

It had been a disastrous charge for the Scarlet Scouts.

"We have beaten them, Jack," said Wild Bill.

"Sure, pard; but who is our friend over there on the cliff?"

"Give it up; but, if it had not been for him the Scarlets might have closed in on us."

"Well, we are out of it all right, thanks to Surgeon Powell, Night Hawk George, and our unknown friend."

"There come our friends now," and Surgeon Powell and Night Hawk George were seen riding down the hill toward the rock pile, having evidently decided that it was best not to follow the outlaws.

Wild Bill and Texas Jack unhobbled the horses and let them rise, and soon the two brothers came up to the rock fort.

Warm greetings followed.

"Who was our friend on the cliff, doctor," asked Wild Bill.

"I was going to ask you that very question, Bill. At first we thought it was either you or Jack, but my glass revealed you both here. Then we much wondered who it could be."

"He will soon show up, I suppose, and may be one of your scouts from the fort."

"Doubtless. He did good work."

"He saved you, for that was a desperate charge of the outlaws, and made with a determination to reach you."

"It was, indeed, but they will not trouble us again."

"No; but where is your other prisoner?"

"Gone!"

"Killed, was he? I felt an interest in that young soldier, and believe he was more sinned against than sinning."

"Oh, he isn't dead, doctor; he has just skipped."

"Escaped?"

"Yes, as cleverly as you please."

"You surprise me, for he seemed utterly crushed by his capture."

"Well, he got over the crush, pard doctor," and Wild Bill related the circumstances of the young deserter's escape.

It was then decided to go further down the stream to a group of trees, where wood and grass were to be had, and to there camp for breakfast, Texas Jack undertaking to make a short scout to see what had become of the outlaws.

This was done, and an hour after, as breakfast was ready, the two prisoners having been released from their bonds to rest them, Texas Jack was seen returning at a canter, but from the direction of the cliff.

"Pards, the outlaws got all they want-

ed and have skipped back over their trail, so we will have to bury their dead yonder. They had a small reserve awaiting them back at the canyon, but all went off together, for I saw them with my glass from yonder cliff."

"Ah, you went up to the cliff there to find our unknown friend, for he has not yet shown up?"

"No, doctor, but I found out who he was."

All were at once interested, the prisoners included.

Seeing the deep attention of the two deserters, Texas Jack called his pards out of hearing and said:

"The trail there is of one horse, and the track is that of the large animal ridden by the Black Butcher!"

CHAPTER XX.

WITH SEALED LIPS.

The mystery was solved as to who had been their friend in the fight with the outlaws, and the scouts were satisfied.

For reasons best known to himself the Black Butcher of Dark Days Camp had preferred to keep out of sight, yet lend his aid.

This he had done right well, for there was no mistaking the tracks of the big black horse ridden by the negro.

The trail of the big horse had led to the cliff from one direction and away in another.

Breakfast over, the Dread Shots went apart from the prisoners to hold a council of war.

If they had failed to capture the chief of the Scarlet Scouts, they had certainly hit the band a hard blow.

Not intending to give up the trail just when the outlaws must be demoralized, nor desiring to return to the fort in a body, it was decided that Night Hawk George should take the prisoners on, the rest awaiting his return in a better camp than the one they then were in.

After delivering the prisoners to the commandant, Night Hawk George would return, bringing a pack horse well laden with supplies. Then the party of Dread Shots would pick up the trail of the outlaws and push it to the end.

So Night Hawk George and the prisoners started for the fort, expecting to reach there by night, while the others went into a camp half a mile away, after which they set to work to bury the dead, yet lying where they had fallen.

A suitable spot was found on the bank of the stream, in a wash, which could readily be filled up, and then the scouts proceeded to gather the bodies of the outlaws.

"To the surprise of all one of the four was found alive!"

Instantly Surgeon Powell knelt by his side and said:

"My poor fellow! We had no idea that there was a wounded man here."

The man was conscious, perfectly so, but dying.

"It matters not, for you could not have helped me," was the reply in a weak tone.

A quick examination proved this to Surgeon Powell, who said:

"I can at least make you more comfortable, though I must tell you that your hours are numbered—yes, your minutes."

"I know it well, sir."

The man's face was darkly bronzed and bearded, yet a look of refinement stamped upon it showed that he had been reared amid good surroundings.

"I will be glad to receive any message you care to leave, or to carry out any wish. I am Frank Powell, surgeon at the fort."

"Frank Powell! Great God!"

"I did not know you! You do not know me!"

In his excitement the man had spoken in a strong voice, while his eyes fairly glowed for a moment as they rested upon the surgeon.

Frank Powell was startled, and turning his penetrating eyes full upon him he said in a low tone, as he grasped the man's hand:

"A dozen years have changed us both greatly, Marcus Melmer, but now I do know my old fellow-student in Kentucky."

"Yes, you know me, and will keep my secret, how I, your chum, a gentleman born, with a bright future before me, and dying here an outlaw of the plains."

"A woman's work it was, Frank, that ruined my life. She was unworthy, and I went wrong for her sake, and had to fly or go to prison."

"They think at home I am dead, so let them believe—you won't tell on me, I know."

"No, Marcus, old friend. But you know that you are dying; you have been one of a band of red-handed outlaws; so why not ease your mind by telling what you know to rid the country of them?"

"It would be just that I should, to aid the law, to save human lives; but I am one of them until death seals my lips, and I will not betray them. Not one of the band of Scarlet Scouts has ever proved traitor; not one of them ever will."

In vain were entreaties; the dying man would utter no word against his lawless comrades, and thus quietly slipped out of life, with the words:

"The Scarlet Scouts never turn traitor."

Apart from the others, Surgeon Powell buried him, for the sake of what he had been, and this humane act attended to, not a body revealing under closest search a slip of paper or aught else to betray identity, the three comrades hid the saddles and bridles of the slain horses and returned to their little camp.

The following night Night Hawk George returned, with a pack horse in lead, having safely reached the fort with his prisoners.

The next morning the four Dread Shots started upon their mission to run down the Scarlet Scouts.

The trail was readily picked up, and dauntlessly the comrades in buckskin would pursue it to the end.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FUGITIVE DESERTER.

The strange young deserter who had so mysteriously escaped from the two scouts in the rock pile was no ordinary man.

He was handsome in face, slight but elegant in form, possessed refined manners, and really would appear more at home in a drawing room than as a soldier in the Wild West, especially one who had the brand of a deserter upon his brow, and who, in escaping, had added to the crime the charge of murder.

Since his enlistment in the army at a border post, nearly two years before, no charge had been brought up against him. He appeared to be a reserved young fellow, always carrying some sorrow about with him, yet was not moody, and never inflicted his troubles whatever they were upon others.

A perfect type of soldier he was, a fine rider, a good woodsman, and a sure shot. It was a great surprise then when he, Alfred Aldrich of the —th Cavalry, had gone off with Sergeant Samuel Carr and two others—had deserted.

No one could understand it, yet he certainly had gone, and with a sergeant, whose going was also a surprise, the other two deserters being of rougher material, and were often in trouble.

The act of fatally firing upon their prisoners had made their crime a far worse one, and prices had been offered for their capture.

Recognized, as two of them had been by Surgeon Powell, one killed and three captured, it was, of course, known that their doom would be death.

Whether it was the dread of their fate

that had so utterly crushed the young deserter, whose bravery in battle had been marked, the surgeon scout was not certain. There appeared to him something beyond the deserter's manner than the mere dread of death, and the doctor had become more and more interested in the youth.

After the talk Wild Bill and Texas Jack had with him, it certainly was a surprise where the young man had so quickly slipped away from them. They were almost willing to trust him unbound; but he had gone, and pursuit was then not to be thought of.

Let us follow the fugitive's steps.

Once out of the little rock fort and Alfred Aldrich made his way across the stream and then ran for it, for the water had helped his stiffened limbs.

Making a mile circuit he recrossed the stream, and, holding on along the bank, on one side of the valley, at last reached the pass through the hills. Hurrying through the canyon, he came to some timber land beyond, and his eyes fell upon the light of a camp fire.

Drawing nearer, he saw that it was the camp of the outlaws. They were burying their dead and cooking a mid-night supper, while several who had been wounded lay on blankets near the fire.

Passing to and fro before the fire was the chief, Captain Rainbow—the man whom the young deserter had seen in the Friendly Glass Saloon the night before, and who had so coolly put his money up as a price upon his own life.

The escaped deserter saw that he then wore a false mustache and was otherwise disguised from what he had been in the saloon.

He certainly was a splendid specimen of manhood as he appeared there in the firelight, with his red sombrero and jacket.

"I could pick him off very easily from here with a revolver even, and that would win the price on his head; but I will not kill a man in cold blood, even for a fortune," and he replaced the revolver he had quickly slipped out of his own belt, which had been lying within his reach when he had been bound, in the rock pile.

"Now to face what is in store for me!" he continued, and raising his hands above his head, in token of submission, he walked fearlessly into the circle of firelight, for the outlaws had no guard out.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE OUTLAWS' CAMP.

The young deserter was supposed by the outlaws to be one of their own members, for the grave diggers were at work a hundred yards away by a smaller fire.

But, the eye of the chief first fell upon the young man and recognized him as a stranger.

With wonderful quickness his revolver was covering him.

"Halt! Who and what are you?" was the demand.

Every eye was upon the stranger, every hand upon a gun, at this alarm from the chief.

The youth had halted, and his reply was unmoved by fear.

"My hands are up. Is that not a proof that I am no enemy?"

"Ah! You are one of the soldiers we sought to rescue from the scouts?"

"Yes, a deserter, hounded also with the charge of murder, and now a fugitive, for I escaped an hour ago from Wild Bill."

"Escaped from Wild Bill?"

"I did, and Texas Jack."

"I can hardly believe that possible," said Captain Rainbow, eyeing the young man suspiciously.

"It was possible for me."

"How did you do it?"

"You will note that I have very small hands and feet?"

"You certainly have."

"I slipped the ropes that bound me over them, got hold of this revolver while the two scouts were outside reconnoitring you, and then passed out of the hole in the wall over the stream."

"Yes, I see that you are wet. And then?"

"I made my way around to the trail to come to your camp, and so saved my neck from the rope."

"And your comrades?"

"I had not time to release them before the two scouts came back."

"Wild Bill and Texas Jack, you say? But there were four of them!"

"Yes, Surgeon Frank Powell and Night Hawk George."

"A quartette of Dread Shots surely. Four wonderful men."

"They are, indeed."

"Where are the last two?"

"Out somewhere watching you, or gone to the fort for aid."

"Ha! That is not pleasant news; but, are only the two in that rock pile?"

"The two and the two prisoners."

"Who was it that checked us at the ford to-night?"

"Wild Bill alone."

"He is a wonder and a terror. But, when did the surgeon scout and Night Hawk George part with the others?"

"Some time before reaching the river, they dropped out to watch you."

"Do you expect that Wild Bill will get more aid?"

"It would not surprise me if either of the Powells decided to ride hard after it, either to the fort or to the stage station nearest."

"Then we must attack at dawn, though I had expected to wait until later."

"You know best," was the quiet rejoinder.

The chief eyed the young man sharply. It was evident that he had some dread lest the youth might be playing him false—that he had been offered terms for his life, if he could lead the Scarlet Scouts into a trap.

"Would you advise that I go and attack the two at daylight?" asked the chief, gazing full into the handsome eyes of the young deserter.

"If you care for your own safety, I would advise not."

"What would you advise?"

"If either Surgeon Powell or Night Hawk George went for help, I would say get out of this with all speed."

"I shall first try and carry that rock fort."

"You know best, Captain Rainbow."

"Why do you call me Captain Rainbow?"

"I saw you in the Friendly Glass Saloon last night, when you put up twenty thousand on your own life."

"Am I the same man?"

"Your false mustache and the arrangement of your hair does not fully disguise you."

"Why did you come here?"

"A prisoner, sure of a death sentence, escaped, and with no food, no horse, nowhere to go, I sought you out as one having a price set upon your head, who would befriend one in like situation."

"I believe you are all right, young man; but, woe be unto you if you are not. Come, have some supper and remain with the band, for we have some extra horses with us."

"If you prove to be all right, I will talk to you about becoming one of us later, but it is no easy thing, mark you, to become one of the Scarlet Scouts, as you will discover, if you hope to cast your lot with us."

With this the chief motioned to the young deserter to sit down near the fire and have his supper, while he continued his pacing to and fro.

He, however, had made up his mind to attack, though for some reason the fugitive urged him not to do so. Attack he did, with a result already known.

With the shots coming from either side of the valley, the chief felt that

aid had come to the beleaguered scouts, but the deserter had urged against his going, and, left in the camp, a strange smile had come upon his face as Captain Rainbow dashed up and called out:

"We have been beaten, men. Mount all. It's a retreat to our stronghold now!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE UNSEEN LOVER.

Back to Dark Days Camp I would carry my reader, and to the night that proved so eventful for many in the Friendly Glass Saloon.

It will be remembered that Kid-Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler, left the saloon after the shot that shattered Sergeant Carr's hand, thus saving the life of Wild Bill.

She had taken in the situation, and at once had fired, and with the same unerring aim that she had sent a bullet through the ear of Brace Barnes, the miner.

Reaching the door she had gone to where her horse was hitched to a tree near the saloon, and, leaping lightly into her saddle, she had started on her way to her lonely home up in the mountain.

If the idea of fear affected the mind of Kid-Glove Kate she did not reveal the fact in her face or acts.

She held on her way up the trail, left the glimmer of the last miner's cabin light behind her, and was riding through a heavy growth of timber, where it was so densely dark that she had to allow her horse to pick his way as best he could, for she could not see, when, suddenly, came in deep tones:

"Halt, and hear me, Kid-Glove Kate!"

Her first impulse was to dash ahead, firing at random toward the voice, but instantly she checked this intention as one that might prove most disastrous to her did the one who called the halt wish her harm.

Quickly drawing rein, she said in a voice as firm as when she told out her cards:

"Well, who are you, and what have you got to say?"

"Much! You did well not to make a break for it, as I would have killed your horse to check you."

"You do not seem to be very friendly disposed toward me?"

"I am and I am not."

"That is a paradox. Explain yourself, please."

"Do you recognize my voice?"

"No."

"I did not intend that you should."

"Come, it is late, and I have no time to waste here, so what have you to say?"

"I have this to say, that I have loved you from the moment I first saw you, and I swear to you by all that is holy that no other man shall take you from me."

The voice of the woman was at once heard in silvery laughter, but it was suddenly checked.

The thought came upon her that she must be in the presence of a mad man, and her laughter would drive him to violence.

Quietly she slipped a revolver from the holster by her saddle horn and said:

"Pardon me, but as it is too dark here even for an owl to see, it struck me as so comical you should tell me of your love that I could not help laughing."

"It may prove no laughing matter to you, for it is not to me, Kid-Glove Kate."

"Who are you?" and the woman's weapon was ready for a shot should the unseen wooer make a spring toward her.

"Does not my love betray me? Does not my heart speak to yours?" was the passionate question.

Kid-Glove Kate was more convinced than ever that she was in the presence of a mad man, but she answered:

"I take no leaps in the dark, and, as for hearts, I have none."

The silence that followed these coldly uttered words was painful to the woman.

Whoever the mad lover was, or just where, for his voice sounded strangely in the darkness, Kid-Glove Kate could not even surmise, but the situation, terrible at the outset, was becoming more and more a tax upon even her iron nerve.

"Well, what have you to say to loving one who was not intended to love, a woman who has no heart, one whose destiny is shaped in unwomanly paths as mine is, being a gambler, a dweller in a wild mountain camp, without home, without friendship.

"I say what have you to say to loving such a creature?"

The woman's voice was harsh now, her words most bitter, but she spoke with almost fierce earnestness.

Not a word but the woman's voice had broken the stillness, and she seemed to dread almost not receiving a reply.

But instantly came the response:

"Kid-Glove Kate, whatever you are, you are, and, as such, I love you. What your past has been, who you were, who you are, matters not; to me you are only the woman who has won my heart, the one woman save my mother that I ever loved.

"My mother died in the long ago; a sister I never had, and do you believe I will let you escape me? Do you believe I will let you leave this spot without your vow to become my wife?"

"Never, no never! I will kill you first!"

The answer of Kid-Glove Kate was to suddenly dash forward, firing her revolver as she did so right toward the voice, for the man, in his impetuosity, had drawn nearer to her.

There was a wild cry, a moan; then the horse was reined back with a suddenness that almost threw the woman from her saddle, while hoarsely came the words:

"You have killed my pard! You have me to deal with now, Kid-Glove Kate!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNDER COVER OF THE NIGHT.

Never in her life did Kid Glove Kate more fully show that she justly held claim to the title often given her, of "A Woman of Nerve," than there in the blackness of night, in the timber, on that lone trail to her home, when she had been halted by a seemingly mad lover.

To his threat to kill her, she had acted promptly—had fired at the sound of his voice; then had rushed her horse forward on the trail to escape.

The flash of her revolver illumined the darkness for a second. It was enough to show her the form of a man staggering backward, hard hit beyond a doubt.

But it had also revealed to her a face she knew! and the recognition caused her to cry out:

"My God! that man!"

But, she was not free to ride away, for the grasp of another was upon her bridle rein, and the words uttered, as recorded:

"You have killed my pard!"

"You have me to deal with now, Kid Glove Kate!"

The voice was resonant with passion. Was she in the presence of another madman? she wondered.

But, undaunted, again she showed the nerve of a dauntless nature; for, in an instant, as soon as she had recovered her firm seat in her saddle, she pulled trigger.

With an oath the man released his grasp on the rein, and staggered back; then her horse bounded on.

She was free, yet in that second, as her horse bounded on, she felt a large something swish by her in the darkness; she heard a shot, and the flash revealed a horseman dashing upon a man on foot.

The shot had told, for the man on foot went down with the words:

"You have killed me, too, Kid Glove Kate!"

The woman heard no more, and could see nothing.

She could not rein in her now terrified horse, and through the timber he sped like a racer.

There was danger of his losing his way, of her being struck by a tree, or limb, and swept from her saddle, maimed or killed—danger that he would dash headlong against a tree or rock or down into the canyon that cut through the timber.

But, she could do nothing save to hold to her saddle, grasping the reins firmly.

At length the runaway shot out of the timber, out of the blackness of death, into the open. The stars shone above, and the woman could see her way; she drew a long breath of relief.

A steady pull upon the reins was useless. The horse would not stop. On, on, he bounded, until at last he dashed up to her cabin, panting like a hound as he halted before the door.

The animal was trembling, too, with fright.

She slipped from the saddle, and with a few words calmed his excitement, while she spoke to the huge mastiff which came to greet her.

Soon she stripped the horse of his saddle and bridle, turned him into the canyon corral, and then, entering her cabin, lighted a lamp.

It revealed strangely pleasant quarters for a house so lone and far away. The cabin was as strongly built as a fort, and had four rooms. There was every indication of a refining hand having arranged its interior. A guitar was there, a cornet, books, and other things to entertain.

There were rifles and revolvers, Indian tanned robes of bear, buffalo, and other animals, with the wings and plumage of many strange birds.

But, the woman had no thought of these now. In spite of her rapid run her face had grown pallid. Its color, almost its beauty, had gone, so hard and stern in expression had it become.

Sinking into a chair, she buried her face in her hands and cried:

"Oh, God! What a terrible ordeal! Can anything in my life ever be painful? To think of those two men of all! Indeed, my life is most cruelly cursed!"

For a long while she sat moaning in agony of spirit until, at last, the tears rose to her eyes, and she sobbed like a child.

But, it did her good, for the tension upon heart and brain were relieved by the tears.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FAIR SAMARITAN.

Tears are ever a safety valve to an overcharged heart, and so she found it, for she soon arose, calm and composed, yet with a face painfully haggard.

Suddenly she saw her dog lying at her feet, and bestowing upon her the pitying look of animal sympathy.

"Come, Nemesis, I want you to go with me."

The dog sprang up instantly.

Getting a lantern, she lighted it; then, going to the rear door of her cabin, she called, and soon her two horses came trotting up to her.

She selected the one she had not ridden that night, bridled and saddled him, and, mounting, lantern in hand, took the trail she had come, the dog following.

Fifteen minutes' ride brought her to the timber; but, once there, she did not hesitate, and rode boldly into its depths.

The lantern lighted her way, and after a short ride she came to the scene of the tragedy.

The woman dismounted, hitched her horse, and the lantern revealed to her the objects of her search.

There lay two forms, of men above the medium size, dressed in miners' garb, and

with bearded faces and long hair; but they were neat in dress and general appearance, handsome fellows, and strangely alike.

The lips of one were sealed forever, but the other was still alive, for his broad breast heaved convulsively and he breathed hard.

The woman went first to the dead man, her face as white as his, as she bent over him.

She laid her hand upon his heart, but no pulsation or throb was felt. It was silent forever.

Her face was stained by the life blood that ebbed from the bullet wound in his side.

Her lips quivered, and a low moan escaped them, followed by the words:

"How could I know? God saw; He will forgive me."

She turned to the other. There was a wound in his breast; also, another just over his temple.

The woman knelt by his side, felt his pulse almost with a professional air, tore away the shirt, and looked at the wound.

"He will live!" she cried aloud, as she finished her examination of both wounds.

"No, no! Both will not be taken! Bad as I may be, I don't deserve this double curse!"

The tears again sprang to her eyes, but, checking them, she at once set to work to save the wounded man.

Her horse was brought near, blindfolded to keep him from being frightened, and then, with a marvelous exhibition of strength, she raised the man in her arms and placed him across the saddle.

This done, she seized the lantern, gave it to the dog, who had dutifully followed, to carry in his mouth, unblinded the horse, and, going on the side on which the man's head hung, half supported it, and walking alongside of the animal, started back to her cabin. Nemesis trotted on ahead and lighted her way, seeming to perfectly comprehend what was required of him.

"I will go after that army surgeon; he will save him; yes, he will not let him die!" she said, as she walked along by the side of the horse.

At last she reached her cabin. Then she gently drew the wounded man off the saddle and laid him upon the ground, the dog watching her every movement.

Leaving her horse standing, she prepared the rustic lounge which she had in her living room, by spreading robes and blankets upon it, and bearing the man into the cabin, placed him upon it.

"I will again examine his wounds; and then go for the Surgeon Scout," she decided.

To her utmost amazement the wounded man spoke to her:

"I have been unconscious, I know, with this wound in my head, but I do not believe I am seriously hurt, though all swims before my eyes. Who are you?"

She had uttered a cry of joy at his first words, but now said, in a low, pathetic tone:

"I am Kid Glove Kate. Don't hate me, for I could not know in that dense darkness, and—"

"I do not blame you; ours was the blame; but my brother?"

"Alas! dead, dead!"

"Poor Hal!" was all he said, and as he heard the sobs breaking from the woman's inmost heart, he said:

"You are not to blame; I see it now."

"God bless you for those words—God help me! But, let me help the living now, the dead later."

"I will dress your wounds as best I can and then go to Dark Days, for the Surgeon Scout is there, and he will surely come at my request."

"No! no! It is not so bad as that, I am sure. The bullet glanced on my head, stunning me, but cut its way out."

"And the one that hit me in the side, your first shot, glanced on a rib, and

did not enter. Had it done so, it would have pierced my heart.

"No, I'll be all right in a week or so—in fact, I wish to go now after my brother's body, for he must not be left to the coyotes."

"I will go; but, first, I will dress your wounds, and I am no novice in the work. You must keep perfectly quiet, or fever will follow, for you have lost considerable blood, and are worse wounded than you think you are."

"I am glad you fired that second shot at me as you fled, for it checked me from firing at you—a woman."

"I was so maddened, then, that I would have killed you, but for your shot that struck me in the head."

Kid Glove Kate saw that he did not know another rider had appeared upon the scene and fired the shot.

She did not tell him, however, but dressed his wounds, made him as comfortable as possible, and then, going out, mounted her still waiting horse and rode away, her dog again following with the lantern.

Once more she reached the dense darkness of the timber, the scene of the tragedy, leaped from her saddle, gazed about her in amazement, and then cried in startled tones:

"The body is gone! What does it, what can it mean?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DEATH UNACCOUNTED FOR.

A couple of days had passed since the night of the thrilling scenes in the Friendly Glass Saloon, and that camp of turmoil, known as Dark Days, had discovered another cause for excitement.

Several miners, returning from a prospecting tour in the mountains, and pushing on to their cabin for the night, had come upon a dead body lying in the timber on what was known as Lone Cabin Spur.

They had a lantern with them, and its flashes had suddenly revealed to them, lying just off the trail, in the densest part of the timber, the form of a man. It lay at full length, the hands peacefully folded upon the breast!

To the surprise and deep regret of the party, they recognized one of the most popular men in the entire camps—by name Hal Burton.

If there was one exception in popularity, it was his brother, Nat Burton.

The two had been in the camps for some time, and were about the only two men who had no trouble—in fact, the "Burton Boys," as they were called, were ever wont to pour oil upon the troubled waters.

They were not gamblers; neither were they drinking men. They had wronged no man, and though never in a quarrel, their courage no person questioned.

They worked a mine together, and worked hard, only coming occasionally to the camps by day, though one or the other was wont to visit the Friendly Inn Saloon each night and take in the scenes there, but not playing any games, nor ever indulging in liquor.

Their mine was well out in the furthest edge of the camps. They had a very comfortable cabin, and were supposed to have a large amount of gold hidden there.

If any one in the camps was wounded or ill, the Burton Boys were the ones to care for him. If any one was in distress or in need, the Burton Boys always extended the helping hand.

Any poor miner who had been unsuccessful, and wished to return home, the Burton Boys at once paid his stage coach fare.

In this way, by only good deeds, and without an act to cause reproach, Hal and Nat Burton had endeared themselves to even the desperadoes and worst characters of Dark Days Camp, and all seemed to admire and love them.

Some of the men felt sorry to see that Hal Burton was apparently infatuated

with Kid Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler, for his actions seemingly proved that to be the case, as he was wont to sit near her and watch her with looks that betrayed his feelings.

"Too bad!" many would say. "She will be the death of him yet, for she is heartless, cares for no one save herself, and will laugh at his love for her."

Still Hal Burton kept up his silent adoration, and the prophecy came true—"she will be the death of him."

Imagine, then, the regret of the miners returning home that night, to find Hal's dead body lying by the side of the trail.

The body was at once taken to the Burton cabin, but no response coming to the call and knock on its door, the men carried it on to their own home.

The next day a visit was made to the Burton cabin, but, as before, it was found closed; no one was there, and no indication that any one had been there since the night before.

Then the miners dreaded the worst for Nat Burton also. Where was he?

Returning to their cabin, they bore the body to Dark Days Camp, arriving at the Golden Gate Inn just after Wild Bill and his party had departed with their prisoners for the fort, as has been seen.

Quickly the news went the rounds of the camps, that the dead body of Hal Burton had been found, and as his brother, Nat, could nowhere be discovered, it was believed that he, too, had met with foul play.

That night the Friendly Glass Saloon was crowded to the doors, and the excitement and resentment felt by all found expression.

Who had killed the "Good Samaritan," as Hal Burton was called?

What had become of his brother, Nat, equally as popular?

The questions remained unanswered, but vows both loud and deep were uttered that the murderer, or murderers, of the brothers should be run down and dealt with as they deserved.

The body found had been robbed of its valuables, that was certain, and on the next day a party would be sent to the Burtons' cabin, to see if it also had been robbed.

In the midst of the excitement over the tragedy, a horse dashed up to the saloon, the rider slipped from the saddle and entered.

It was Kid Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

The coming of Kid Glove Kate was a relief to all.

All knew how silently devoted, never speaking his adoration, yet showing it in every look, poor Hal Burton had been to the fair Gold Gambler, and they felt sure that her woman's wit might give them some clue as to who might have been the murderer of the brothers, for both were looked upon as dead, as Nat could nowhere be found.

Dave Clagett, as usual, was the spokesman, and when Kid Glove Kate had taken her seat, bowing pleasantly to all, as was her wont, he said, amid a breathless silence:

"Kid Glove Kate, we have bad news for you—very bad."

"Indeed? What is it?" and the woman looked up without the quiver of a muscle, while her hands, holding a dice box, were without a tremor.

"Hal and Nat Burton, the Good Samaritans, have been foully murdered."

"Do you know this to be a fact, Dave Clagett?" she asked, calmly, still betraying no excitement.

"I'll tell you just what we do know, Kid Glove Kate, and you can judge for yourself."

"I should like to hear, for it cannot be that both of those splendid fellows have been murdered."

"Splendid fellows they were, Kid Glove

Kate, as you say; but I fear they have turned up ther toes, both of 'em."

"Tell me what you know, Clagett," she said, quietly.

"Well, the body of Hal Burton was found dead last night, in the timber on your range, by a party of miners coming back from prospectin'. They took ther body to his home, but all was dark there, so they carried it to their own cabin, and the next day, as no one was at ther Burton Boys' layout, they brought it here, and it's laid out in ther Golden Gate Inn, whar you kin see it if yer wishes ter, now."

"No! no! no!" and for a moment the woman almost lost her superb self-control.

"But I will, later, for I must get used to feeling that he is dead. I remember how he used to sit there, at that table, and turn his pleading eyes upon me, night after night, yet he seldom ever spoke a word to me."

The last words were said almost as though the woman was thinking aloud.

This she seemed to realize, for she started and said quickly:

"And his brother, Nat Burton?"

"Ah! that's what we doesn't know about, Kate. Yer see, his body hain't been found, but we's sure he's dead, or he'd a put in an appearance."

"He will be found some day."

"Oh, no, for he'd have turned up if he could. He is either dead or them Scarlet Scouts have kidnapped him and robbed the cabin."

"Not so bad as that, I hope, Dave."

"Well, Hal Burton's body was robbed when found; and who would have done that but the Scarlets?"

Cool as she was, the woman started now, and cried, excitedly:

"Hal Burton's body was robbed?"

All were struck with her manner.

"Yes, it had been robbed of the handsome watch, chain, and ring he always wore, along with what money he had with him," was Dave Clagett's response.

"Who found his body?" was the next question.

The names of the miners were given, five of them. All were present, and one of their number, Tom Talbot, stepping forward as spokesman, said:

"Yes, Kid Glove Kate, we found ther body, and I guesses no man here will say we was the ones to rob it."

All understood the emphasized word, that no man would say that they would rob the body.

"No man has said that you did rob the body, Tom Talbot, but a woman says that the finders should discover who did do it, in order to clear themselves."

This was a dead centre shot, and Tom Talbot and his pards felt it, the former suddenly crying out:

"Why, the one who killed Hal Burton robbed him, Kid Glove Kate."

It was the woman's turn to flinch now. Her face flushed and paled suddenly, many present observing the fact.

But she said, in her usual calm way:

"Yes, one would naturally believe that the one who killed Hal Burton would be the robber, now you put it so, Tom Talbot."

"Then you takes back what you said of the finders of the body robbing it, Kid Glove Kate, for it's an ugly shadow to hang over an honest man, though a thief wouldn't mind it."

"I am perfectly sure, Tom Talbot, that you and your pards did not rob the body—perfectly sure; but the suspicion remains, and you should find out who did, and I will help you."

"Good! Find ther robbers, and you get ther murderers!" was the emphatic response of Talbot, and a murmur of approval went through the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UGLY RUMORS.

Dark Days was in truth greatly worked up over the killing of Hal Burton, and the mysterious disappearance of his brother Nat.

There was no end to "opines," and there were some very bold and unkind ones among the denizens of that wild camp.

One was that Nat Burton had killed his brother, taken all their gold, and fled; but this had few believers, for Nat Burton was believed to be incapable of a mean act, let alone such a deed as a brother's murder.

There were others who suspected Tom Talbot and his chums of the murder of both brothers and of robbing them—an opinion which a number soon got into their heads.

This was after the departure of Kid Glove Kate, who, having heard the affair discussed, as has been related, asked for Surgeon Frank Powell, and, finding that the Four Dread Shots had left Dark Days that afternoon, returned to her cabin, saying she would be down the next day to attend the burial of Hal Burton.

After her departure a pall seemed to but much drinking. Men gazed with suspicion upon each other, and but a word was needed to cause an outbreak or outburst of passion.

Rumors gained currency that Tom Talbot and his companions wished to fasten the crime upon some one; then came a story that Kid Glove Kate knew more about the murder than she had admitted.

Men talked in whispers and congregated in groups. Dark Days was darkened with a sombre gloom, dread, and fierce mood.

But the night passed without an explosion, and when day dawned the crowd had dispersed.

But the mines were not worked that day, for Hal Burton was to be buried, and all Dark Days was to be in attendance.

As the morning passed, the men began to congregate in larger number than before known.

The good, the bad—the honest, hard-working miner and the idler, the tough, the sport, all were there.

Business was suspended, save that of feeding the hungry at the Golden Gate Inn, while Barney was kept busy quenching thirsty throats.

The body of the dead miner lay out upon the piazza in a pine box, where all could see it.

The face was handsome even in death, and wore a placid look, as though the man had solved Death's mysteries and was at peace.

All passed by the coffin and gazed upon the face of the Good Samaritan, but with what emotions who could tell!

Another rumor had gone abroad—that Tom Talbot and his party had seen the "Black Butcher" coming along the trail where the body had been found.

He must have passed the body before the miners did.

Tom Talbot and his pards had gone in search of the negro, to his cabin, and Dave Clagett went with them, but only to find that the Black Butcher was not there. His cabin was locked, and he could nowhere be found.

All of which had a very suspicious look. Had he, after his defeat in the Friendly Inn, two nights before, by Wild Bill, been ashamed to return to Dark Days, and had he killed the Burton Boys, robbed them, and fled to parts unknown?

This belief was gaining ground.

The cabin of the Burton Boys had been visited by a deputized party, and broken open.

It had surely been visited by some one other than the owners, for things were scattered about in confusion, a search seemed to have been made for gold, but whether gold had been found none could say.

But there was no clue as to who had been there, nor of the missing Nat Burton, nor of the murderer.

But, the funeral over, then the first duty would be the search for the murderer.

"We are waiting for Kid Glove Kate,"

Dave Clagett explained, as he stood by the coffin.

"Here she comes now!" cried a voice, and, just then, Kid Glove Kate came into view, her red riding habit flashing in the sunlight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RETREAT OF THE SCARLET SCOUTS.

"Captain Rainbow!"

"Well, Bounce?"

"Watch that young fellow as we go along, and you will, I believe, see that he is trying to mark our trail so that Wild Bill and his scouts can follow us."

"I'll watch him, and if he is doing that, his doom is sealed, Bounce."

"I may be wrong, sir, but you can tell."

"I'll soon know."

The Scarlet Scouts were on the retreat from the scene of their defeat at the hands of the Four Dread Shots.

It will be recalled that they buried their dead, and, with the young soldier deserter, Alfred Aldrich, who had escaped from his scout captors, had begun their retreat to their stronghold.

Confident that the Dread Shots had received reinforcements from the fort, Captain Rainbow was not slow in retreating.

He did not fear a successful pursuit, for his men were well mounted, and, though several were wounded, they could push rapidly on.

If they could gain the mountains to the northward, twenty miles away, they could keep at bay, in a running fight, half a dozen times their number, that they well knew.

They likewise knew their way thoroughly, and pursuers would be at a disadvantage of finding their trail.

Then, too, the nature of the country would enable them to cover up their tracks completely.

This they were prepared for, and if the Dread Shots did not press them too close, until they reached the mountains, the fort detachment would have a hard time following them afterward.

The young deserter rode near the rear of the outlaw band, and wondered that the Scarlet Scouts made no effort to cover up their trail. He saw that they pushed rapidly along; but he was well assured that the four scouts were men who would not be deterred by numbers from pursuit.

He was also aware that they were well mounted, and if they had received aid from the fort that they would lose no time in pressing on after the outlaws.

But, the fact that they did not make the slightest attempt to cover up their tracks he did not understand.

After a rapid ride of twenty miles the foothills were reached, and the outlaws went into camp for a rest and something to eat.

One hour was thus passed; then Captain Rainbow dashed ahead once more.

Looking back over the country they had come, as they reached the mountain climb, nothing whatever could be seen of the scouts in pursuit.

But, Captain Rainbow did not put too much faith in that fact. He only too well understood that Surgeon Powell, Wild Bill, and their comrades were dangerous men to have upon their track, and the Four Dread Scouts might have doubled on them in some way.

Up in the mountains, after a short ride, they came upon a wide, shallow stream that crossed their trail, or, rather, was crossed by their trail, and wound its way swiftly through a comparatively smooth bed.

The bandit band halted upon the bank, when one of their number dismounted and climbed up among some rocks.

He soon descended with a large bundle in his arms. This, when opened, revealed a lot of mufflers of leather for the hoofs of their horses.

These were quickly strapped on their

animals, and the young fugitive now saw that the Scarlet Scouts intended to cover up their trail, and of course knew that the bandits kept the mufflers hidden there on the stream for just such contingencies.

One thing surprised him, and that was that they made no effort to hide from his observation the manner of covering up their tracks.

He did not know whether to take it as a compliment, or a fact that he would never get the chance to betray them.

Once more ready, they rode into the stream, went up it for several hundred yards to where a rock shelved into the water, providing them an easy landing.

One by one the horses left the stream by this rock, standing there until the water had dripped from each animal. That done, they rode on over the flinty soil until they re-entered the trail a quarter of a mile from where it crossed the stream.

The fugitive could now see that they had left not the slightest trail beyond where they had ridden into the water.

Convinced that no trail would now be left for some distance, he was guilty of several acts which had caught the keen eyes of the outlaw Bounce, as they rode along, and caused him to report to Captain Rainbow that the deserter was "marking the trail," in his opinion.

CHAPTER XXX.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

Having had his attention called to the young deserter, the chief suddenly called out:

"Say, young man, ride up alongside of me, for I wish to have a talk with you."

Alfred Aldrich at once obeyed, and was soon by the side of Captain Rainbow.

The later gazed at him searchingly, but without in any way seeming to disconcert him.

"I wish to ask you something about yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall expect you to tell me only the truth."

"Yes, sir; of course."

"Your life may depend upon your answers."

"Yes, sir."

"Does Yes, sir, mean that you intend to answer me freely and fully?"

"I will be governed in my answers by the questions asked, Captain Rainbow."

"Oh, you will, eh? Suppose I use the power I have to force you to answer?"

"No power can force me to answer what I think best not to answer."

"Torture will sometimes bring out a secret."

"No torture can force me to speak against my will."

"We shall see."

"What I can properly answer I will, but nothing more."

"Well, we'll see what you think you can answer."

"Yes, sir."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Alfred Aldrich."

"How old are you?"

"In my twenty-third year."

"How long have you been in the army?"

"Not quite two years."

"Where did you enlist?"

"In Texas."

"You were well born, doubtless?"

"Yes, sir; well born."

"Parents rich?"

"They once were rich."

"Living yet?"

"No; dead."

"Why did you enter the service as a common soldier, when it was doubtless in the power of your friends to send you to West Point?"

"I took the place of a friend."

"How do you mean?"

"A friend, who was compelled to leave

the service, could only do so by placing a substitute in the regiment. I was that substitute."

"Have you long to serve?"

"The term of my enlistment—five years."

"But you got tired of it; hence deserted."

"I did not desert because I was tired of the service, for I had good officers, was well fed, clothed, liked my regiment and comrades, and there was a prospect of promotion for me within a very short time."

"Why did you desert, then?"

"That I must decline to answer."

"There were four of you?"

"Yes."

"Who were the others?"

"Sergeant Samuel Carr and Privates Robert Ross and Leonard Sawyer."

"Why did they desert?"

"They had their reasons."

"You will not tell?"

"Really, their motives for deserting did not then, and do not now, concern me."

"You were stationed at Fort —, to the south of here?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you deserted, what did you do?"

"Roamed about, until we went to Dark Days, and became miners, having struck a good lead there."

"Were you not afraid of being discovered?"

"Not particularly afraid. We took the risks. Army men seldom come to Dark Days, and in our disguises as miners we did not expect to be recognized, if any came."

"But, Wild Bill, the scout, recognized you?"

"He and Surgeon Frank Powell, I believe. At any rate, we were discovered."

"And the sergeant was killed?"

"Yes, by Wild Bill, but he brought it upon himself."

"Perhaps he thought it preferable to hanging."

"It may be, but I don't think so. He thought he could kill Wild Bill and bluff the other Dread Shots, while the men of Dark Days would rescue us, but he was mistaken."

"Why did not the men rescue you?"

"The combination was too strong for them."

"What combination?"

"Those Four Dread Shots."

"Four Invincibles, eh?"

"Then the act of Kid Glove Kate was against us."

"What did she do?"

"Sent a bullet through the sergeant's hand as he was about to draw trigger on Wild Bill."

"She is a dead shot, then?"

"None better."

"I was so broken up at our capture that I cared for nothing, saw nothing, but I was told what happened."

"What do you know of that woman gambler?"

"Nothing."

"Can you tell me nothing about her?"

"Nothing."

"In escaping from your pursuers, when deserting, you killed two soldiers?"

"Two soldiers were killed, yes."

"Well, young man, you will tell me nothing more about yourself?"

"Not a word."

"Then I have something to say to you," was the stern response of Captain Rainbow.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MARKING A TRAIL.

The young fugitive did not flinch under the trying ordeal he had passed through from the questions of Captain Rainbow.

Nor did he show any signs of uneasiness at what the chief had said when he refused to tell more about himself.

"I am ready to hear all you have to say, Captain Rainbow," he coolly remarked.

"You escaped from Wild Bill and Texas Jack in a very mysterious way," began the chief.

"I think otherwise; for I was able to slip the ropes over my hands and feet, and as neither of the scouts was in the rock pile, I just crawled through the hole in the wall and got away."

"Wild Bill is not a man to escape from, young man."

"Even Wild Bill can be in situations where he cannot always prevent a prisoner's escape."

"And, escaping, you came direct to us?"

"Yes."

"What else was I to do?"

"I was on foot, without food, had only one revolver, and I came to you for protection."

"Well, as a deserter, and charged with murder, you cannot refuse to join my band of outlaws, for a man in your position can hardly be so particular."

"I have not shown that I was so particular, when I came to you for help in my difficulty."

"Then you are willing to join the band of Scarlet Scouts?"

"Yes."

"You know that you put your neck in the hangman's noose in doing so."

"It is already there, under the crimes I am charged with."

"A man who joins the Scarlet Scouts leaves it in but one way."

"What is that?"

"Death."

"If other men take chances, I can."

"You don't look like an outlaw."

"An angel's face often is a mask for a devil's heart."

"Very true."

"Take yourself, for instance, Captain Rainbow, for no one would suspect that you led a life of evil, if they met you elsewhere than at the head of your Scarlet Scouts."

"Thanks."

"I can return the compliment," dryly responded the outlaw, struck with the young man's bold comparison.

"Well, sir, do you want me as a member of your band, for if not, you had best set me adrift before I learn any more of your secrets," suddenly asked Aldrich.

"You are a cool one," muttered Captain Rainbow, and as he spoke the young man reached out, and, grasping a witch hazel, broke it off, stripped it of its leaves, and urged the animal he rode closer up alongside of the chief.

"It is not an easy thing to become a Scarlet Scout, young man."

"I should think you would have to be particular in the selection of members, for the lives of all may hang upon the treachery of one man."

"You are right there."

"It is that fact that makes us know our man, and more, he is put to the test in a very striking manner."

"I think I could stand it."

"His nerve is tried by having to hold objects in his hand for me to shoot out of it, and also from off his head."

"From what I have heard of your deadly aim, that is no great risk, unless you wish to clip or kill a man."

"You are complimentary."

"But that is not the only test."

"Yes, sir."

"A man has to prove his own skill with rifle, revolver, lasso, and as a rider."

"I can pass in that, too."

"And that is not all—but you have dropped your switch."

"It is easy to get another one, sir."

"But I am interested in the tests a man has to stand to become a Scarlet Scout."

"There are others which I will not tell you until sure that you are going to become a member."

"It rests with you, sir."

"And yourself, for you will have some ordeals to pass through that may cause you to back out."

"I am willing to make the trial, sir."

for if I do say so of myself, I am not readily backed down," and Alfred Aldrich leaned over to a bush he was passing, broke off another switch, and slowly stripped it of its leaves as he rode along.

The chief was silent for some time, and at last said:

"Well, when we reach our stronghold, you will be put to the test—but you have dropped your switch again."

"Yes, sir; it was careless of me; but there are plenty more along the way, and I have to use them, as I have no spurs on."

In an instant the chief halted and called out:

"Bounce, you are right, for this fellow has been steadily marking the trail with switches as we rode along."

"Come here and bind him securely to his saddle, and if I mistake not he is a spy of Wild Bill Hickok, and that will mean death to him."

Five minutes after the outlaws were again on the march, and the deserter was bound hands and feet in his saddle.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DEAD SHOTS' PURSUIT.

The "Dead Shot Tramps," as the four noted scouts were called, started upon their trail of Captain Rainbow and his outlaws, with the perfect confidence of men who would undertake any deed that was possible.

They picked up the trail of the Scarlet Scouts at their night camp, and followed it at an easy gait, for they knew that their plan was to find the retreat of Captain Rainbow, and not to overtake him upon the way.

They hoped to find his stronghold, and there strike their blow, one that would be fatal.

There must be no mistake, for if the outlaws were too strong in situation and numbers for them, they would return to the fort for aid.

But this the Four Dead Shots did not wish to do.

Having started out upon the trail as a quartette, they did not care to have to call for help, nor would they do so unless absolutely necessary.

Thus far they had done fairly well, they considered, in their trail.

If Captain Rainbow had escaped them at Dark Days Camp, they had captured four deserters, upon whose heads a price was set, even though Wild Bill had had to kill their leader, and one, the Soldier Kid, as his comrades called him, had escaped.

They had met the outlaws in three separate brushes, at the crossing of the stream, and the two attacks on the Rock Pile, and each time had stood them off with no loss to themselves, and certainly considerable loss to their foes.

Now they were upon the trail of the outlaws, and it seemed that they had no idea of being pursued by the four scouts from the broad tracks they left behind them.

"If they have not covered up their trail, pards, that they might lead us into an ambush, we are all right," said Wild Bill, as he rode by the side of Surgeon Powell, while Texas Jack and Night Hawk George followed, the pack horse keeping close behind them.

At this Surgeon Powell drew rein and said:

"We must take no chances on that, Wild Bill."

"That's so, doctor."

"We know that they can only go up into the mountains through the Eagle Pass, and so we can flank around, drop the trail, and, reaching the foothills, come along them until we pick it up again, thus avoiding an ambush."

"That's it, doctor, we'll do it, and if we don't cross their trail we will know that they have not gone up into the mountains," answered Wild Bill.

The scouts accordingly branched off from the trail, bearing to the right, and by a wide flank movement which carried them some miles off their way, they at last reached the foothills.

Following down these, they came upon the outlaws' trail again, leading straight up to the Eagle Pass.

"They may have left a party to ambush us, Surgeon Powell, though I think not, and when we reach where the soil is softer we will be able to find out from the number of hoof-tracks."

"Yes, Bill, for they would certainly leave half a dozen men to ambush us, at least."

"They have made no effort here to hide their tracks," remarked Texas Jack.

"They will cover their trail later on," replied Night Hawk George.

Continuing on up the mountain, the scouts came to where the soil showed the trail distinctly.

It showed that none of the horses had been left behind, and to the experienced eyes of the Dead Shots it proved that no ambush thus far had been planned for them.

At last they came to the stream in the mountains.

Texas Jack rode across and called back:

"No trail here of their coming out."

"Push on, Jack, and see if you can pick it up," called out Wild Bill, and he added:

"I'll go up the stream, you go down, Night Hawk, and, doctor, will you search about here for some clue, for right here is where they had a way of covering up their tracks, and depended upon it."

The Four Dread Shots then separated, and Surgeon Powell, setting to work for a thorough search, soon found in the bushes the mufflers for the hoofs of a horse.

"Ah! this is a valuable find," he cried out to Wild Bill, who was returning, and had to report that above on the stream he had noticed a bush broken off, as though for a switch, for the leaves were stripped from it; but there was only a slanting rock where the outlaws could have left the stream.

Night Hawk George returned then to report no discovery of where the outlaws had left the water.

Soon after Texas Jack came back, and he had the missing link in the chain of discovery, for he had found where a switch had been stripped from a bush, the leaves scattered along the trail, and there was no sign of tracks, but the appearance of something having passed along.

"We have a friend among those outlaws who is marking the trail for us—we will push on until we have to camp for the night," said Wild Bill.

But after pushing on for some distance all signs of a marked trail utterly failed them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TRAIL'S END CAMP.

When Kid Glove Kate rode up to the Golden Gate Inn she was greeted with a cheer, and for two reasons:

The crowd were becoming impatient, and then she was exceedingly popular, though feared.

"It's natural to be for a woman."

"I got used to it as a boy, for I never knew a woman who was on time," muttered a miner.

A moment after he had been agreed with in this, Kid Glove Kate came in sight.

She was pale, but answered the cheer of the crowd with a smile and bow, and slipping from her saddle, went straight to where Dave Claggett and a few of the other important men of Dark Days were standing.

"I am late, but I came by the home of the Burton Boys, to have a look at it for myself," she said, quietly.

"You're in time, Kate, for corpses don't

mind waitin', and live men has been trained to it whar a woman is consarned," answered Landlord Claggett.

The woman smiled and replied:

"I have brought these, for I picked them on the way."

It was a fine bunch of wild flowers, and she had tied them up with a white ribbon, evidently picked out from among her effects.

"That's nice of you, Kid Glove Kate."

"We left the cover off, thinking you'd like ter take a last look at him."

"Thank you, Dave," and her voice quivered.

Then she moved toward the pine coffin, and bent over the silent form.

Into the lifeless hands she placed the wild flowers, and her face was the hue of the face she gazed upon, while a strange, hard expression swept over it that caused her to momentarily look years older than she really was.

A miner set the example, and took off his hat, and at once every head was uncovered.

There was not a word spoken, the silence was painful, and every eye was riveted upon the woman, as she stood gazing upon the dead.

Suddenly her head began to droop lower and lower, and, to the amazement of the rough men about her, she bent downward, and, dropping upon her knees, her lips pressed the white brow of poor Hal Burton.

It was a strange, a touching tribute.

Why she did it no one there knew—that secret rested in her own heart.

A moment she remained thus, then rose slowly to her feet, as though with an effort, and turned away.

Dave Claggett now motioned to the pall bearers to advance, the lid was put upon the coffin, and the march for the cemetery was begun.

Close behind the body walked Kid Glove Kate, her faithful horse following her, and four abreast came the men of Dark Days Camp.

The burying ground was a mile away, in a valley sheltered by cedars, and upon the bank of the stream which had been appropriately christened Bath Tub Creek.

There were no old tombstones, moss-grown with age, in that burying ground.

Only wooden slabs marked the graves, that were marked at all, for the majority had no headboard.

A high log fence encircled the burying ground, to keep off the coyotes, and over the gate some artist among the miners had painted the words:

"Trail's End Camp."

What could be more appropriate?

But not satisfied, and evidently bearing in mind the inscription he had read over persons he knew did not deserve the laudation they had received after death, he had added that more than truthful couplet:

"Here lie the dead—

"And here the living lie."

Beneath this he had drawn a hand with index finger pointing downward.

Whether this was suggestive of the grave or the Devil's Domain is not known, but it is to be hoped that he meant the former.

To "Trail's End Camp" the body of the Good Samaritan was borne, with only an occasional growl from a pall bearer that:

"It was no easy job ter tote a stiff a mile," and from another:

"That burying ground are so well patronized it oughter be nearer ter ther camps."

The graves in the little burying ground had an uncommon newness of aspect; all seemed to have been dug within a very few years, and on a number the dirt was not yet dry.

Over among a group of three cedars the grave of Hal Burton was dug.

The two grave diggers were standing by their latest addition to the Village of

the Dead, and awaiting the coming of the cortege.

Up to the grave came the pall bearers, the crowd encircled it, and as the coffin was lowered to its last resting place the firm, musical voice of Kid Glove Kate was heard repeating the service for the dead, and ending with the fateful words:

"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, earth to earth."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TO FIND THE MURDERER.

The ceremony over the grave of Hal Burton did not end with the solemn words of Kid Glove Kate as she said:

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," for immediately after her beautiful soprano voice rose rich, clear, and sympathetic, as she sung:

"Nearer My God to Thee!"

Startling it seemed at first, almost weird, and for two lines her voice was alone heard, for the men about gazed spellbound upon her.

But then a manly voice was heard near singing tenor; a baritone followed, then a bass, and the melody rolled up the valley rich-toned and pathetic.

With the next verse the crowd joined in, heads were uncovered, and the echo of hundreds of male voices, led by that ringing soprano, was awe-inspiring and impressive beyond description.

As the last echo rolled away up the valley, the silence could be felt and men stood like statues, their eyes riveted upon the mysterious, remarkable woman who had so swayed them.

Her face was white, the long lashes lay upon her cheeks as her eyes were downcast, and she looked strangely beautiful standing thus.

Then she took from her belt, where it hung, a silver cornet, and placing it to her lips, wild and thrilling rose the plaintive notes of "Taps"—the soldier's last good-by—"Light out."

As the notes grew less thrilling and ended in the farewell, they were touching in the extreme, and many a hard, toil-stained hand was drawn across eyes to wipe away a tear, eyes that had been tearless since childhood.

With a wave of her hand to the crowd, the woman turned from the grave in silence, walked to where her horse awaited her, leaped into the saddle, and dashed off at a rapid gallop, sweeping up the trail that would lead her to her home.

The crowd in an awed way departed from Trails' End Camp, many of them deeply impressed, and some of them beyond a doubt taught to consider whether they, too, would not soon be one of the campers in the Bivouac of the Dead.

Back to their cabin homes went many of them, to their work went others, while a few of the more reckless sort, once out from under the influence of the woman's presence, and away from the grave of Hal Burton, returned to the Friendly Glass Saloon, closed for the first time in its history, for Brassey's had been the sweet tenor that had joined in with Kid Glove Kate, and soon the rattle of pasteboards, the clink of glasses, the oath, the jest, and rude laughter were in full swing once more, and Dark Days was itself again.

From the grave to the gay it turned literally, and the night fell with Dark Days in an orgie.

In this hurrah it was natural that the man, or men, who had killed Hal Burton, as was believed, would be thought of, and it was decided to make a move on the morrow to run down the murderer or murderers, as the case might turn out.

The idea gained ground that the Black Butcher was the one who had fired the fatal shot.

If so, he was also guilty of having killed Nat Burton, if killed he had been, and if not it was believed that the miner was being held in durance until he could

be forced to tell where his gold was, if his captor had not already gotten it.

In this way the matter was discussed, and a party of men constituted themselves a band of searchers to go forth upon the morrow, search the camps and the country surrounding for some trace of Nat Burton, and also to hunt down the slayer or slayers, as they happened to discover who had been guilty.

The Black Butcher was to be their especial case, and their first, for the party wished to believe that he alone was guilty, after what they had heard from Tom Talbot and his pards, of their having seen the giant negro going along the trail, and knew that he must have met Hal Burton, if alive, or come upon his body.

But the searchers happened to remember, drunk as they were, that the Black Butcher was not a desirable person to corral unless there were men in sufficient numbers, and they therefore divided their force of fifteen men into parties of five each.

This being decided upon, they separated to get what rest they could and prepare for the work of the morrow.

There was another band of searchers also formed to discover the facts of the mysterious murder of Hal Burton, and those who constituted the band were Tom Talbot and his pards, who had been the finders of the body in the timber.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SECRET MEETING.

Tom Talbot, after the burial of Hal Burton, had lingered in the little burying ground for a purpose.

He had bidden his immediate pards, who had been with him when they found the body, to do the same, hence they had all concealed themselves among the cedars and awaited the dispersal of the crowd.

Much impressed by the scenes of the burial, the singing of Kid Glove Kate, and all that took place at the grave, the faces of Tom Talbot and his companions wore a saddened look when they met there among the cedars for a talk.

When the last man of the crowd had gone, and the "Camp of the Dead" had been left supposedly deserted, Tom Talbot gave a whistle and it was answered here, there, and in various parts of the burying ground.

Soon after the five men were gathered together in the shadow of the three cedars sheltering the grave of Hal Burton, and Tom Talbot said:

"Pards, you know why I asked you to remain here after the funeral?"

The others nodded.

"But I want to tell you that it was best for us to have a plan to go by."

Again a nod.

"Now, when we found the body lying in this grave, we acted square and honest, and did what we deemed best."

"Sure!" said the others.

"But it seems out here a man is suspected unless he can show proof he is not guilty of every charge some fellow wishes to put upon him."

"We is suspected, that's certain, and it puts us in a bad way," said one.

"So bad, that if we don't show we hain't guilty, it might put rope about our necks," another remarked.

"That is just it, pards," returned Tom Talbot.

"We are in for it, and no mistake."

"Whoever killed Hal Burton and got away with his brother Nat, got away with the money and what else they had."

They all agreed to this.

"Now, we didn't kill him any more than we robbed him, and we don't know anything about what has become of Nat Burton."

"But the fact remains, we are under suspicion, and my idea is to start right from here and go on the hunt for the murderer and robber."

"I'm with you!"

"Me, too."

"Count me along!"

"Don't forgit me!"

These answers showed Tom Talbot that he was backed up by the whole outfit.

All wished to raise the suspicion off their shoulders.

"You know," continued Tom Talbot, "that what the boys of Dark Days want to do they don't think much over until after it is done."

"That's so."

"They hang a man first and tries him after they plants him."

"And if they finds they was wrong they gets drunk ter soothe their feelings."

These expressions of opinion regarding the ways of Dark Days citizens were not far wrong.

"Well, pards, we wouldn't want to be hanged if we were guilty, let alone as we are innocent."

"Hold on, Pard Talbot, I'd jist as soon be hanged, if guilty as innocent, so long as I was strung up."

"I tell you I hain't stuck on this sudden justice in Dark Days, nchow."

"We don't wish to hang, anyway, pards; but we know that a shout against us would start the ball in motion, and we are but five among hundreds."

"Now, to save all trouble, we must arrange our plans now to start upon this search, and we must stick to it to the end."

"We have some good pards here whom we can tell why we go, and if we come back with success we don't care what others there think of our having gone."

This view of the situation seemed to be readily accepted by all, and then Tom Talbot and his pards sat down to arrange their plan of action.

Their horses were some distance out of Dark Days proper, and they wished to attract nobody's attention in going there, and for reasons that could be well understood.

They would flank around and get there, equip themselves, and start out, and it was the belief of Tom Talbot that they would soon meet with success.

Having met the negro, Black Butcher, as they had, near the body, Tom Talbot felt sure that he was the guilty one, and to find him would be their first endeavor.

The negro lived apart from other cabins, and alone, and a visit to his home would show whether he had deserted the camp for good or not.

"Now pards, here it is, and to-night we will go to the cabin of the Black Butcher, for if we get him we save ourselves, and I for one am not ready to die yet, or be driven out of Dark Days yet," and Tom Talbot led the way out of the burying ground.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TRIANGULAR GAME.

It was the day following the burial of Hal Burton that the self-constituted regulators met together at the appointed rendezvous.

They had made their plans when very much under the influence of liquor, save two exceptions, to make their search, and win honor by discovering the murderer of Hal Burton, and to find out what fate had befallen his brother.

At the rendezvous only enough had turned up to form two searching parties, the others having doubtless fallen by the way, or been too deeply steeped in liquor to remember anything about the happenings of the night before.

Having kept sober, the two exceptions to the otherwise unanimous orgie, at once selected themselves as "leaders," and they won the day, for no one objected to their leadership.

One of these self-appointed leaders was Brace Barnes, the man who had been twice branded, once in each ear, by the Gold Gambler, Kid Glove Kate, as will be recalled.

Brace Barnes had kept very quiet since his last affair with the woman who would not receive his attentions either as friend or lover, but his face showed that there was a dangerous fire slumbering within that would yet break forth.

He now saw a possibility, as leader of a band of reckless fellows, to seek revenge, and his intention was to play it for all there was in it.

The other who had named himself leader of his immediate party of searchers was Loafer Dick.

This individual will be recalled as one who haunted the saloon and Golden Gate Inn with seemingly no other aim in life save to pass away the time.

Work agreed with him mentally and physically, and he was content to apparently eat, drink, and be merry to-day, for fear that on the morrow he might be called upon to shake off what there was mortal about him.

It was Loafer Dick who had been in the saloon when no less a personage than Captain Rainbow had returned in disguise and invited him to drink with him, at the same time holding a conversation with him so compromising in tenor that had it been overheard a rope would have quickly been brought into requisition as a much-needed cravat for the man whose words had betrayed him to be the spy in Dark Days of the outlaw chief.

But what Loafer Dick really was and what he appeared to be he kept very wisely locked up in his own sinful heart.

With two such leaders as Loafer Dick and Brace Barnes, it may well be surmised that the two parties going out on a search for the murderer, as alleged, of Hal Burton, and connected with the mysterious disappearance of Nat Burton, had other prospects than the duty named.

The parties being ready for the start, both leaders at once directed the attention of their followers to the fact that the Black Butcher was one to consider, after the report of Tom Talbot and his pards of his whereabouts on the night of Hal Burton's death, and his mysterious disappearance since, or, at least, his non-appearance in the saloon or inn at Dark Days as was his wont.

It was therefore decided that a call on the Black Butcher would be in order, after the scene of Hal Burton's death had been visited and a start made from there, when the situation had been thoroughly gone over.

Another proposition, did Brace Barnes make to his men, and that was that he believed that Kid Glove Kate knew more about the death of Hal Burton and the disappearance of his brother than she would admit.

Her excitement and her decided show of feeling had been marked, as also her saying that if the body of Burton had been robbed, it must have been by the party who found it—Tom Talbot and his companions.

All things considered, Brace Barnes thought it best, after a visit to the Black Butcher, to also go to the cabin of Kid Glove Kate and demand of her what she knew of the whole mysterious affair.

From curiosity and other causes the men agreed with Brace Barnes in this, they were anxious to see the woman at home, but one of them made a remark that was out of order by suggesting that Brace Barnes had no more ears to spare, should the Gold Gambler take a notion to clip him with another bullet.

"Your ears are so much like those of an ass, Donkey Dan, I would not attract attention to them by alluding to mine, if I were you; but if she wishes to clip ears I'll suggest she brand you as you have so much to spare. Your name is a just one, indeed."

Under this cut Donkey Dan subsided, and the bands started on their trail, knowing nothing of Tom Talbot's also having begun the search, thus making it a triangular game, as it were.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE HOME OF THE HOPELESS.

While he had been riding along with the young deserter by his side, Captain Rainbow had been studying him most carefully.

He was not long in coming to the conclusion that he was no ordinary individual, that he was far above the ordinary man, young as he was.

He also arrived at another conclusion, and this was that the deserter was certainly marking the trail.

What he did was done most cleverly, and in the coolest manner; but the chief was convinced that the man was marking the trail by his breaking off switches and scattering them and the leaves along the way.

It looked perfectly natural that he should break off the switches, and yet there was certainly more in it than to hasten on his horse, Captain Rainbow was assured.

So it was that he was arrested.

The deserter made no comment upon his arrest, other than to say:

"I have seen from the first you suspected me, Captain Rainbow, and I don't blame you for being particular, living as you do with a rope around your neck."

"It will be a rope about your neck, young man, for the work you have done to betray us."

"Doubtless."

"But I hope you will at least delay hanging me until you can discover in some way that I have not had one word of agreement with Wild Bill or his comrades, as you suspect, that I am just as much an outlaw in their eyes as you are, and escaped to you wholly because I wished to save my neck and knew not just where else to go."

"I would like to believe you, for you can be useful to me."

"But I shall keep you out of harm for the present."

"I can but submit."

They rode on as before, the young soldier by the side of the chief.

Coming to a mountain stream they rode boldly into it.

Turning up the stream, which was knee deep to the horses, and very swift, several men dismounted and took the muffers off the hoofs of the animals, hiding them at a convenient place among the rocks for future use.

Up the creek they rode for half a mile, and coming to a bend, overgrown with bush and beneath a high cliff, they rode out upon the hard, rocky soil, which left no tracks.

Just at the base of the cliff was a dense growth of dwarf pines, but into these the chief rode, the prisoner and the others following, one man dismounting to put the branches back into position that no sign might be left of their going through.

Within fifty feet was the cliff, and in its wall, hidden by a huge boulder, was the entrance to a cavern.

It was large enough to admit a horse, and dismounting the men led the way, the prisoner's feet being relieved so that he could walk.

Dark it was, and winding, but after going several hundred yards light appeared ahead, and the prisoner saw that they were emerging from the cavern into a deep canyon, surrounded by lofty cliffs on all sides.

Out into the canyon it was discovered to be a fertile valley, with a stream through its centre, and trees and grass in abundance.

There must be another ingress and egress to the valley, which looked to be a hundred acres in size, the stream must enter and leave it somewhere, but where the prisoner could not discover.

It seemed like a basin, oblong in shape, and completely walled in by the cliffs, barren on top and ranging in height from a thousand to three thousand feet,

their faces completely impassable even for a mountain sheep.

"You do not seem to dread my telling the way here should I escape," said the prisoner, as they once more mounted to ride on up the valley.

"What did you expect?"

"That you would blindfold me."

"You have heard of the motto that:

"He who enters here leaves hope behind?"

"Oh, yes, often."

"Well, that is the case with the man who comes here as you do."

"That is cheerful."

"I would rather have been blindfolded and taken chances."

"Death is the blindfold I depend upon," was the significant reply.

The prisoner made no reply, but shrugged his shoulders, and gazed ahead, where a camp was now visible.

It was at the head of the basin, on the banks of the stream, which he saw now tumbled over a cliff into the valley, and there were some dozen small cabins built in a semi-circle, and about which fully a dozen men were visible, while horses, cattle, and a few burros were feeding about on the grass that grew luxuriantly upon all sides.

"This is my stronghold, Aldrich, and you are more than welcome," said the chief as he halted before the largest of the cabins.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SCARLET SCOUTS AT HOME.

Alfred Aldrich gazed about him with interest, mingled with curiosity, when he dismounted in the stronghold of the outlaws, the "Home of the Hopeless," as Captain Rainbow had fittingly put it.

The cabins were in a semi-circle and eleven in number.

The doors were on the upper side facing the cliffs, the windows in either end, and in the rear, looking down the valley, were portholes for rifles.

These commanded the valley with long range rifles from the entrance through the cavern.

With the cabins stoutly built as they were, a score of well-armed, determined men could keep at bay several hundred who would have to advance under a galling fire of over half a mile without protection, for the timber was at the other end of the basin and behind the cabins.

The cliffs, if their faces were an indication, could not be scaled.

The cabins were across the stream, which made a bend, crescent-shaped, and had a steep bank, with only one fording place.

It was a natural but ideal stronghold, as visible to the deserter, but what means of escape were there he could not discover.

Down the valley he saw that the stream disappeared between two cliffs, doubtless falling out of the basin as it fell into it, and the cavern was the only entrance for man and beast visible.

If there was another the deserter had yet to find it out.

The men he saw in the stronghold were of the same wild-looking desperado class as those who had come there with him.

The deserter counted them and all told he found there were twenty-two, not including the chief, or the several wounded that had been taken to one of the cabins used as a hospital.

The home of the chief was a pleasant one, in the centre, larger than the others, and very comfortable inside, he saw, Captain Rainbow using a hammock in place of a bed.

Under the shed before the cabin a table was set, and against the cliff was an open shelter where a fire was built and a negro busy getting supper.

The deserter also observed that the table had a clean cloth upon it and that the service was of the finest silver and china, showing that the chief had struck

some family once wealthy, that had been driven West to seek a new home.

About the camp lay half a dozen large dogs, watching the preparation for supper at the different camp fires along the cliffs.

"I see that you are interested in my Home of the Hopeless," said Capt. Rainbow, approaching the deserter, after he had made his toilet, and having removed his false mustache, now appearing as he had when making his bold visit to the Friendly Glass Saloon when he offered such a large sum for the body, dead or alive, of the outlaw chief, himself.

"Oh, yes, I have been much interested," replied Aldrich.

"It is the very spot for an outlaw stronghold."

"Those cliffs can only be reached by one trail, and that is unknown save to my men, and there I keep a guard."

"As they cannot be reached, save as I tell you, we have no fear of a foe getting up there."

"No."

"The entrance through the cavern is the only way to get in here, and if we are too much crowded we can retreat for there is a pass through these cliffs in our rear, only four feet wide in places, and coming out three miles away, and showing no sign of its existence across the stream which it emerges upon."

"Oh, yes, we are well prepared here against a foe, young man."

"So I see, but I don't like you telling me all about it."

"Why?"

"I fear that you are going to kill me, hence do not fear my escaping and leading Wild Bill and his comrades here."

"Or make you one of us."

"That is what I most desire, I assure you."

"Well, Mr. Aldrich, it depends upon yourself which it shall be."

"How do you mean?"

"Every member of my band of Scarlet Scouts is put to a crucible test that tries his body, heart, and brain, and failing he gives up his life, while passing the ordeal he becomes a member."

"I like you, and give you the benefit of the doubt as to your marking our trail for Wild Bill and his fellow Dread Shots to follow, so will allow you to stand the test."

"It is an hour before night yet, so I'll assemble the men right after supper and decide whether it is life or death to you."

"I am content—man has but one life, one death."

"I have faced the one, I shall not shrink from the other," was the cool response of the deserter.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE UNERRING TRAILERS.

The Dread Shot Four were hard men to throw off a trail, once they set out upon it.

Schooled, as each one was, in all the craft of the border, and in mountain and plain lore, Indian trickery and white man's cleverness, they were a match for anything that might obstruct others and throw them from the trail.

If they could not overcome an obstacle in one way, they patiently turned to another way of doing it, and, foiled again, they never gave up.

Thus it was that the Dread Shots again got upon the trail of Captain Rainbow and his men, when temporarily foiled at the stream, where the outlaws had muffled the hoofs of their horses to avoid leaving a track.

Convinced by the switches found and the newly torn-off leaves strewn along the trail that they had a friend in camp, or at least some one who wished them to follow, they pushed rapidly along.

There were no tracks, it was true, but the switches told the story that some one had passed along that way, and

more, to their experienced eyes a close examination had resulted in the finding out that the outlaws had muffled the hoofs of their horses.

Each one of the Dread Shots had been up to that clever trick themselves, and the spots where the trail had been hushed showed them that the band had passed along, faintest of trails though they left.

But who was the friend among the outlaws? they wondered.

The idea that it might be the young deserter was not to be considered.

It must be some prisoner the outlaws had captured, they thought.

Then came the thought in rebuttal of this, that a prisoner would be securely bound and not in a condition to pull switches and strip them.

At last the surgeon scout said suddenly:

"Wild Bill, I have an idea."

"Give it to me for the Lord's sake, doctor, for we are in need of it."

"What if it is the Black Butcher?"

"Ah!"

All uttered the exclamation.

"It looks reasonable."

"It must be the giant negro."

"But what is he to the outlaws?"

"He must be one of them."

"How else could he know what they were about?"

"He certainly has been our friend, even if he is one of them."

"I guess he's the man."

"So do I."

"The Black Butcher it is."

"Then we have a strong ally in the enemy's camp."

So ran the comments hastily, each scout having his say.

At last Texas Jack asked:

"But what became of the deserter?"

"I give it up, Jack," said Surgeon Powell.

"He was on foot, had not a blanket or bite of anything to eat."

"He had one revolver, his own, which he slipped out of his belt," said Wild Bill.

"That he would hardly dare fire while near where he escaped, and if he could kill any game with it he had no matches to build a fire," suggested Surgeon Powell, while Night Hawk George remarked:

"He is certainly in a bad way, for he would not dare go to the camps again."

"He might join the outlaws, and I suspect that is what he did," said Wild Bill.

"Yes," remarked Surgeon Powell, "I suspect that is what he did, poor fellow, for it was do that or starve."

While thus discussing the situation in general the Four Dread Shots had ridden on, now and then observing a switch and freshly pulled leaves along the trail.

But at last the tell-tale switches and leaves were no longer seen.

The brushing signs along the trail were here and there visible as they progressed, but nothing else.

They were going it blindly, therefore, save these occasional signs where a hoof had dragged along.

At length the stream was reached near the cliffs, and where the Scarlet Scouts had turned in.

Narrowly watching the descent into the water, Wild Bill and the others each made the same discovery.

It was that there appeared regular signs of where a number of horses in descending into the water had dragged their hind feet after them.

Smart as they were the Scarlet Scouts had overlooked this fact, though, not expecting they would be supposed to have muffled the hoofs of their horses, they expected that their trail would not have been followed that far even by the Dread Shots.

They were mistaken, that was all.

CHAPTER XL.

THE SURGEON SCOUT'S DEAL.

The Dread Shots felt sure that they had made a discovery.

The outlaws had passed into the stream at that point.

Where had they left it was the question.

Whoever had been their ally had ceased longer to give them any clue, or he had been discovered in his good work.

The four men stood in thoughtful silence a few minutes.

They were each one hoping that some one would advance an opinion.

The surgeon scout was the first to break the silence.

"Pards, I have a word to say."

All were most attentive.

"If this is the way to the stronghold of Captain Rainbow, it is the trail they often travel, and someone will be along here sooner or later."

There is no denying this plain fact.

"If so we would be discovered, and this we do not wish, after tracking them this far."

"You are right, doctor," said Wild Bill. "Now our trail here has not been disguised."

"No."

"We must not disguise it going back."

"Ah!"

"Our plan is to retreat from here at once, as though we had given up the trail."

"We will go back to the other stream, a dozen miles back and enter it."

"It was, I noticed, where game went in abundance for water, and if we get there before night our trail will be seen going thus far, and then into and out of the stream it will be utterly obliterated by deer, bear, coyotes, and other wild animals that will go there to-night."

"You are on the right track, Surgeon Powell, and no mistake," said Wild Bill.

"Texas Jack told me that up the stream above the slanting rock were good timber and grass, and we can follow it up until we find a good camping place where we can go into hiding."

"This we can do by night and bright and early to-morrow morning three of us can start out on foot and come here, leaving one in camp with the horses."

"We can go prepared for a twenty-four-hour or two days' stay, and in that time we can find out all there is for us to discover."

"We are good walkers, all of us, and can readily cover the twenty or so miles between where we camp and we now are."

"On foot we cannot be tracked, and we can push ahead to the end of this outlaw trail, which I am convinced is not very far off, or I am greatly deceived."

"That we may show no partiality, we can draw lots for who will remain in camp, while the other three go on the hunt."

"What do you think of my plan, pard?"

The scouts had decided before the surgeon had said very much that he had the situation down to a fine point.

They at once said so, and Wild Bill remarked:

"We will ride about here to leave our tracks, to show that we made a diligent search before giving up the game."

"Yes, and then, as the horses are to have a long rest, we will push them hard until we reach our camp, especially as we wish to reach the stream before the game begins to go there for water at nightfall," Surgeon Powell added.

Fifteen minutes after the party turned upon the back track.

The horses were kept at a rapid gallop, and this was continued until the stream was reached, while the sun was yet nearly an hour above the horizon.

Turning up the stream they continued in its bed past the slanting rock, where the outlaws had left the water, and nearly a mile above came out into a little break in the range, where a more delightful camping place could not have been found for the comfort of both men and horses.

A camp fire was built among the rocks, pine straw raked up for bedding beneath the thick, overhanging trees, the horses staked out upon a bit of meadow land, and by the time darkness set in all was in readiness.

The scouts readily saw that there was no trail, save that made by game, near there, and nothing to bring the outlaws there, as they had so well covered up their tracks and intention, as the animals going to the ford to drink would do for them.

After a hearty supper they turned in for the night, setting no guard and were soon fast asleep.

Before the peep of morn they were up, breakfast was gotten, and when it began to grow light they were ready to start out on foot over the trail of the outlaws.

Drawing lots to see who should remain in camp it fell to Night Hawk George, and he accepted the duty uncomplainingly, as any of the others would have done.

Then the trio set forth on foot on their mission of discovery, and determined to face whatever was before them in their perilous undertaking, and which Wild Bill called the surgeon scout's deal.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DREAD SHOTS STILL HUNT.

If the trio who had started for the outlaw retreat on foot had entered into a pedestrian match they would have won it.

They went off at a swinging, rapid step, and within three hours had reached the stream where they had been the day before.

The tracks of game coming for water had obliterated their own trails at the ford, and was a proof that it was the same way at the crossing of the other creek.

No fresh tracks were there to show that the outlaws had passed along that way, and after a consultation the three guards separated to make a thorough search of the surroundings, for they were sure that the Scarlet Scouts had covered up their tracks by taking to the water.

At night they were to meet at the ford again and report progress in their search.

There was no hurry about them, but a patient way that meant a strong trial for success in their undertaking.

Texas Jack started down the stream along the bank, while Wild Bill crossed and sought the country beyond, leaving Surgeon Frank Powell standing upon the bank in deep meditation, for he was to go up the creek.

For some time the surgeon scout was lost in thought.

He had taken in the surrounding country as well as he could at a glance, and the result was that he did not believe that the outlaws had turned up or down the stream to continue on their way further up into the mountains.

He had been over that trail once before, and he understood that the range beyond wound around to the northward, and there was no pass through it for many miles, as far as he knew.

Then he was aware that right there at the ford was the trail the outlaws would take in going to Dark Days, as also to hold up a coach on the run between the camps and the regular eastern stations.

In fact, from that ford trails could be taken in any direction.

This considered, the surgeon scout came to the conclusion that the stronghold of the outlaws must be in that vicinity.

They would hardly be so far away from their operations that it would take a day to strike a camp, a coach, or a wagon trail, he was assured.

This conclusion arrived at, he begun to go slowly up the bank.

A couple of miles showed him that he could go no further, for the stream

flowed through a cliff range, the latter winding in the shape of a crescent in each direction.

On account of a fall of twenty feet the outlaws could not have kept to the stream.

Crossing, with no thought of the wetting he would get, the surgeon scout decided to descend upon the other bank.

It was rugged walking, and he came to a rocky spur he had to climb over.

In doing so he descended in a dense pine thicket.

As he moved along his quick eyes detected a disturbance in the thick pine straw.

A closer investigation and he knew that a number of men or horses had passed along through the pines.

He took the trail leading back toward the stream, and soon came to where a landing could be made from the water.

In fact, there was where the outlaws had left the stream.

Back he went through the pines, and a short walk brought him under a towering cliff.

Nor was that all, for he beheld the entrance to a cavern right before him.

Had he not stood just where he did he would not have seen the cavern.

With his hands stretched out before him, he entered the dark tunnel, and going very slowly the light at last appeared ahead of him.

He was just starting forward with a brisker step when he suddenly beheld a horseman coming toward him from the valley now beheld beyond.

Instantly he shrunk back into the cavern, close against the wall, and knew that he could not be seen, though out in the broad light of day he beheld the horseman perfectly.

"I will know him whenever I want him again, if his horse don't discover me and force me to kill him," muttered the surgeon scout.

On came the horseman, and from the roll of blankets back of his saddle and his haversack full of provisions the surgeon scout decided that he was going on a considerable trail.

The horse held on through the cavern, shied badly as he came to the crouching surgeon, and his rider, cursing him, muttered something about:

"An infernal coyote."

But he passed on, and the scout followed him in the darkness.

CHAPTER XLII.

TOM TALBOT'S TRAIL.

If the Black Butcher had known that three separate bands of five men each were upon his trail he would have felt far from comfortable.

But so it was, for Loafer Dick was the first one to lead his band to the home of the giant negro.

This house was peculiarly situated, too, for it was up at the head of a canyon, where there was no exit from, save the entrance, or, if so, was known only to the negro.

It was a mere hut, cleverly built, and another one in the rear was for the negro's two large black horses.

There was a spring there of purest water, a good grass plot, and the timber was right at hand.

Bear, deer, and mountain lion skins, with the heads of elk, mountain sheep, and other game, were seen in abundance, showing that the negro was a daring and expert hunter.

But the cabin was silent, and yet it could not have been deserted, the negro could not have gone away to stay, for one of his black horses was staked out in the meadow land.

That his stake pin had not been changed for several days, however, was readily seen by Loafer Dick and his pals.

"Let us camp here for him, and feed on his grub," said one of the men.

But this was not agreed to, as they

all believed the negro might not return for a day or more, and they wished to continue their search, taking it up at the scene of Hal Burton's death, where trails could be found.

This was decided upon, and the party went on their way.

The next visitors to the lone cabin of the negro was the party under Brace Barnes.

They had gone from the scene of the Burton tragedy, and taken up the trails from there.

They had discovered the large, heavily shod tracks of the big horse ridden by the Black Butcher.

The trail had come from Dark Days, and then went toward his cabin, but mingling with many other tracks, it had been lost to sight.

That the negro had halted upon the scene of the tragedy, and moved about there, the large tracks plainly revealed.

So to the home of the Black Butcher Brace Barnes led his men, leaving a second visit he had to make until later.

The party entered the canyon to discover the trail of the five men who had been there before them.

They at once knew that it must be Loafer Dick and his party, and Barnes remarked:

"If they leave the cabin I will be surprised."

But they were all surprised, for there was the horse staked out, the cabin and all.

Nothing had been disturbed.

Brace Barnes at once decided that the cabin must be opened.

This was done by drawing out the staple that held the padlock.

Meanwhile a bright lookout was kept for the coming of the negro.

They did not wish to be surprised, for five of them would not be a match for the black giant, they feared, if he should creep up and open on them before they saw him.

The cabin was neat and well furnished.

There was a trunk in one corner, the bed made up, cooking utensils, clothing, ornaments, a table, rustic easy chair, a lamp, and a Bible.

The men were surprised, and nothing was disturbed.

The staple was driven back again as it had been found, and then Brace Barnes said:

"Now, pards, we will not wait, for we don't know when he will return."

"And now?" asked one.

"To the cabin of Kid Glove Kate," was the answer, and the band left the cabin under their leader, who had determined to bring the beautiful girl gambler into the mysterious murder of Hal Burton.

Then there came a third party of visitors to the cabin of the Black Butcher.

They were Tom Talbot and his companions.

They were on the hunt of a solution of the mystery to clear their own lives of suspicion.

The trails of the others were seen, and they expected that the negro had already been arrested.

But the sight of the horse proved to the contrary.

The horse was humanely led to water and his staking ground changed.

The cabin was not disturbed, but the men went into hiding to await the return of the negro.

Darkness came and soon after the Black Butcher appeared.

He dismounted before his cabin, and as he turned to take the saddle off of his horse, five rifles covered him from around the corners of the hut, and Tom Talbot called out:

"Hands up, Black Butcher, or we'll riddle yer!"

The negro started, turned his hands upon his revolvers, and asked:

"What does this deal men, and who are you?"

"We are regulators, and we want you for the murder of the Burton boys."

"All right, I give in; but you have treed the wrong coon," was the answer.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A WOMAN'S THREAT.

Brace Barnes led his party from the home of the negro to the lone dwelling place of Kid Glove Kate.

The men followed, for they were willing for Barnes to have the responsibility of what he was doing, and they wished to see the strange woman in her own home.

What would she do? Would she admit them to the cabin?

Would she receive them in her usual courteous manner, or would she resist their coming?

All were anxious to know, and no one more so that was Brace Barnes.

He did not look at his best, for there was the bandage around his head which Surgeon Powell had put over his wounded ear.

His face was haggard and pale.

But he looked determined.

He had evidently made up his mind to make a bold venture and have his way.

Was it really to find the one who killed Hal Burton and caused the disappearance of his brother Nat, or was it on account of his revengeful feeling toward the girl gambler?

True, in his life duel with her at the Friendly saloon he could have killed her, but then no one knew better than he that such an act would have outlawed him from Dark Days camp, or he might have been held to answer then and there.

But now came his chance to act.

He would beard the woman in her den, so to speak, and if revenge could be gotten by laying the charge of Hal Burton's murder upon her, he would do it.

He was only sorry that he had not been able to capture the Black Butcher to have him to fall back on if his accusation against the woman did not take well.

It was near sunset when they drew rein near the home of Kid Glove Kate.

Brace Barnes could not but recall his former visit there, when she had slit his left ear with a bullet.

It had healed, but her later unerring aim at his right ear caused him to still feel the pain.

The men halted suddenly when they came to the threatening "dead line."

They read the warning the woman had put up, and looked uneasy.

All eyes were upon their leader.

His face had grown white and stern.

But he was determined.

"Men, we must not back down at the very goal," he said.

The men waited for him to lead.

He made the advance and crossed the dead line.

And the others followed.

But again came the unanimous and quick halt.

It was a second warning, for Nemesis, the huge and savage mastiff, gave a loud note to voice their coming.

He appeared, too, and came walking toward them in a very deliberate manner, taking them in as he did so with a glance of malignant hatred.

They would have preferred to have him come at them with a rush.

But Nemesis knew his business, and numbers did not frighten him.

The hairs on the ridge of his back stood up like a wild boar's, his teeth were gleaming as he drew back his lips to reveal them, and his eyes were beginning to grow red with anger.

The men all raised their rifles and were ready for the savage brute, as he came slowly toward them, growling in the basso of a lion.

He did not halt, and Brace Barnes still moved on toward the cabin.

"Men, we must kill that brute first and show that we are in earnest," said

Barnes, for now Nemesis was not fifty feet from them and still advancing.

But ere they could fire a ringing voice was heard, and Kid Glove Kate stepped into view, rifle in hand:

"The man that kills that dog I will kill!"

It was all that she said, but she meant it.

CHAPTER XLIV.

FACING HER FOES.

The threat of Kid Glove Kate to kill the man who killed her dog was heeded by four of the five men.

Whether he had already pulled trigger, or his trembling finger fired the rifle by accident, or he supposed that Brace Barnes and all the others would fire as he did, or again, did he really dread the dog would be upon them, will never be told.

But fire he did, and a yelp showed that his bullet had gone true.

The instant that the dog dropped Kid Glove Kate it was who was the Nemesis.

She kept her word to the letter, for her rifle was thrown to her shoulder, and its sharp ring followed.

It was a deadly ring, too, for the man who had fired in the face of her warning fell forward upon his face, dead.

The woman's bullet had hit him squarely in the forehead.

She cared to take no chances.

If the men had come to attack her, as the words of Brace Barnes had shown, she at least had put one out of the fight.

The men were startled at her quick vengeance, and began to retreat slowly.

The call of their leader halted them.

"Cowards! would you let a woman put you to flight?"

"She warned us, and she kept her word," he said.

"And I warn you again, Brace Barnes, that I allow no visitors to my home.

"Beware of another warning, for I will kill, as you have seen."

"We mean you no harm, Kid Glove Kate."

"Then stay away!"

"We have come to see you upon a matter of great importance to you, and to all of us."

"What is it?"

"You are aware of the death of Hal Burton?"

"Did I not attend his funeral?"

"You know that his murderer has not been found."

"Well?"

"You know that his brother Nat is supposed to have been killed?"

"So I heard."

"And that both brothers were robbed?"

"Yes, it was said so, I know."

"Now the Black Butcher was seen near the scene of the murder."

"Ah!"

"And he cannot be found."

"Who has looked for him?"

"We have."

"At his cabin?"

"Yes, and elsewhere."

"And could not find him?"

"No."

"Well, you know, or should, that he often disappears for days at a time."

"I know that."

"Then he will appear, and if you suspect him of having murdered Hal Burton, you are off your trail, and will have him to deal with, and that you know means much."

"I do not fear him, Kid Glove Kate; but let me tell you that it is just such utterances as you were guilty of at Dark Days, and just now, that cause you to be suspected."

"Ah! of murder?"

"If not, of knowing about the murder of Hal Burton."

"Fool! every man in the camp knows of Hal Burton's death, so why should not the only woman within a hundred miles—"

"Women generally know everything intuitively."

"Do you know more than the rest of us about Hal Burton's death?" came the pat question.

"Are you sent here to question me?"

"I came for that purpose."

"A self-appointed inquisitor, I take it."

"We wish to know what you know."

"There is one who will never know," and the woman pointed significantly to the dead body lying at their feet.

Several of the men shuddered.

Their faces showed that they wished to be well away and quickly.

"There are four of us yet alive, Kid Glove Kate."

"Oh, yes, but death is often sudden."

"Do you mean that you will tell us nothing?"

"About what?"

"Your knowledge of Hal Burton's murder and the disappearance of Nat?"

"I have nothing to tell—you!"

"There is a way to force you to do so, Kid Glove Kate."

"Ha! threats?"

"That dog is not dead, as you think—that fellow's aim was bad, and I am very much alive."

The men glanced uneasily at the dog.

They saw that she spoke the truth, for though the bullet must have hit him, and he certainly dropped down suddenly, he was now seen to be crouching, ready for a spring, and apparently awaiting orders from his mistress.

"You are threatening now, Kid Glove Kate," cried Brace Barnes, savagely.

"Yes, and I do again."

"Leave my home, or I will open fire, and I never miss!"

Whatever Brace Barnes might have done, those with him had had enough, and with one accord they turned and fled.

One instant their leader hesitated, then saw the rifle of the woman rising, the dog moving, and throwing the body of his dead pard over his shoulders, to protect him, he also stampeded at no slow pace.

CHAPTER XLV.

COMPARING NOTES.

Out of the tunnel-like cavern, running through the cliff into the valley of the Scarlet Scouts, Surgeon Powell watched the horsemen ride, his horse anxious to go ahead, as though afraid of what was behind him.

But the outlaw evidently thought that it was a coyote crouching in the cavern, and had frightened his horse, for he did not even cast a backward glance.

Had he done so, he would not have seen the Surgeon Scout, who kept back in the shadows of the cavern, yet could distinctly see the outlaw.

The Surgeon Scout also kept an eye on the alert for any one else that might be following the outlaw, for well he knew his danger if surprised there beyond retreat.

He moved out among the pines as the outlaw disappeared, crept to the edge of the thicket, saw the man ride into the stream, and go down it toward the ford.

When out of sight the Surgeon Scout followed slowly.

He had made a discovery that would keep, he well knew.

He did not doubt but that the stronghold of the Scarlet Scouts was up the valley, beyond the tunnel, and not very far away.

Returning to the ford, he saw the trail of the horse where the animal had left the stream's bed, and, following it for some distance, he discovered that it led the way they had come.

"It would be useless to follow him afoot, as I am, and besides, he has gone on a long trail, doubtless, while I will know him if I see him again."

"No, it is important to remain right here, and I hope Wild Bill and Texas Jack will not be long in coming in."

With this the Surgeon Scout returned to the ford, to find Texas Jack there.

"Why, doctor, I thought you went up the stream, and here I find you coming over our old trail," the Texan called out.

"I have done both, Jack."

"But I am mighty glad you were not here a while ago."

"Why, doctor?"

"You would have killed a man."

"Ah!"

"I observed that trail leading out of the stream when I came here."

"It was an outlaw."

"You saw him, then?"

"I was near enough to him to have driven my knife to his heart."

"Why didn't you?"

"He will keep for future reference, Jack, and I am glad you did not see him, for had you fired on him it would have been a mistake."

"Just what I would have done, sir, if I could not have brought him to otherwise."

"And, if I am not mistaken, your shot would have been heard by the outlaws."

"They are so near, then?"

"I do not think they are very far off; but that we will discover when Wild Bill comes."

"I guess he'll be along soon, sir."

"I hope so, for we have time enough yet before night to push ahead on my find."

"But what did you discover, Jack?"

"No more than that the outlaws could not go down this stream more than a few miles from this ford, either by keeping in the water or upon either bank, for the going is too rugged."

"Then I came back, and I am glad I did—but here comes Wild Bill," and as Texas Jack spoke the Chief of Scouts was seen coming briskly along in the distance across the ford.

The coming scout plunged into the stream, and wading across soon stood by the side of his companions.

"Well, Bill, what news have you?"

"Next to nothing, doctor."

"The trails all divide beyond here into game tracks, and I don't believe are followed by the outlaws, for, in fact, there is nothing to expect going further in that direction than to run upon Indian bands."

"And I found nothing, Pard Bill, but the doctor here has made a ten strike," said Texas Jack.

"What is it, sir?"

"We'll go up the stream, Bill, and I'll show you, instead of telling you."

"Good!"

"But a horse has crossed this ford."

"Yes, one ridden by an outlaw, and he's gone back on the trail we came."

"I'll show you where he came from, and then we will decide what is best to be done."

With this the Surgeon Scout led the way across the stream and turned up the bank, the others following close upon his heels.

Reaching the pine thicket on the rocky point, he said:

"They turned up the stream, and there is where they came out of it."

With this he pushed on into the pine thicket, and the well-trained eyes of Wild Bill and Texas Jack quickly detected the trail through the pass, leading toward the cliff.

They merely pointed at it and followed, and a moment after Surgeon Powell halted under the cliff and said:

"There!"

"You have found them!" said Wild Bill, as he saw the entrance to the cavern.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE TRIO'S DECISION.

Wild Bill and Texas Jack grasped the hand of Surgeon Powell, to show their appreciation of what he had done.

"You've struck it rich, Pard Doctor," said Jack.

"Yes, as rich as a gold find," added Wild Bill.

"Come on!"

"I've been through," said the Surgeon Scout, and he led the way into the darkness.

The two scouts followed closely into the darkness of the tunnel.

Light was soon visible ahead, and at last they looked out into the hidden basin.

"I was right here when I saw the outlaw coming."

"What did you do, doc?"

"Went back into the blackness."

"Did he pass you there?"

"He did."

"It was a close call."

"For him, yes."

"I wonder his horse did not get frightened."

"He did."

"But I was mistaken for a coyote, and my man passed on."

"You were playing in great luck, for to have had to shoot him might have spoiled all."

"So I thought, Bill."

"But this is no safe place, so let us reconnoitre from the front of the cavern and see what we can find out."

They moved further along, and each having his field glass, they turned it up the valley.

Across the entrance to the cavern ropes were stretched, and this prevented horses or cattle from straying through.

Up the valley they saw cattle and horses feeding, and at the other end were visible the cabins of the outlaws.

The glasses revealed all, though they were nearly a mile distant.

They saw the cliffs that walled in the valley, the stream tumbling over into it, and forming quite a little river as it wound through, and they could hear the roar of its second fall out of the basin, down toward the lower end.

"Snug as a bug in a rug," said Wild Bill.

"The very place for them," Frank Powell remarked.

"And those cabins show that they are fortified," added Texas Jack.

"There are eleven cabins, the centre one larger than the others."

"Counting four men to a cabin, that would give them a considerable force."

"One that could defend their position against big odds," remarked Surgeon Powell, looking at it with a soldier's eye. After a while he remarked:

"They will have to be surprised at night, and their position carried, for it would take a regiment to dislodge them, yes, and a gun as well."

"Surprised, they can be beaten even with a smaller force, and they little look for a surprise."

"I do not believe they number over two dozen men, at best, for they have never been seen with even that large force, and then so many would make the division of spoils very small."

"No, they have not over two dozen men, I am confident, and we can surprise them at night, for we have their secret now, and carry their stronghold in fine style."

"With soldiers?"

"I wish we could, Bill, bring soldiers; but the truth is a move of a force from the fort would be reported ahead, for I am sure they have a spy there."

"And my band of scouts number only a dozen."

"They are not enough; but I'll tell you what we can do."

The two scouts were all attention.

"We will foot it back to our camp to-night, and to-morrow take the trail toward the fort, double near the rock pile, and return to Dark Days."

"As though we had just come from the fort?"

"Yes."

"And get a force in Dark Days?"

"Yes."

"There are spies there, sir."

"Oh, yes, and plenty of them, no doubt."

"But there are good men and true there also, and we must camp there and pick them out, for Dave Clagett, Prasney, Tom Talbot, and others are square, and they can help us."

"Yes, doctor, and we must make no mistake in our men."

"It would spoil all, of course, though no man must know what his work is until we get to the scene of action."

"How many will you select, sir?"

"You are the chief, Wild Bill, I surgeon of the outfit, and Jack and Night Hawk your aides."

"Thirty will be enough, I think, of the kind of men we pick."

"I can have news come in of a hold-up, after we have selected our men, and start with them down the stage trail, then switch off and make a quick ride of it here for a night surprise."

"The very thing, Pard Doctor," said Wild Bill.

"Couldn't be better," added Texas Jack.

Then, after again taking in the valley as best they could, the three Dread Shots retraced their way through the tunnels, recrossed the stream, and in the gathering gloom of night started on their tramp to the camp of Night Hawk George.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE ALTERNATIVE OF CRUEL TESTS.

In the stronghold of the Scarlet Scouts there had been happenings well worthy of making known.

It will be recalled that the outlaw chief, Rainbow, had shown a special liking to the young deserter, whom he had made a prisoner, or he was playing a part in appearing to do so.

He had said that he would give him the benefit of the doubt, in having marked the trail, would consider that he had not been sent by Wild Bill to betray the Scarlet Scouts, and admit him to become a member of the band, if he could stand the tests.

What those tests were the deserter had no means of knowing, and could not guess, but he was very sure they were as severe as mortal man could stand and live, for he had never yet heard of a Scarlet Scout turning traitor to the band.

He felt that he was in for it.

He had fled to the camp of the outlaws for protection, after he had escaped from Wild Bill, and he had to face the music, whatever it might be.

He did not flinch at the words of Captain Rainbow, when the latter told him that he would at once see if he was worthy to become a member.

His bonds had been taken off, and he was invited to take his supper with the chief, an honor he did not know whether or not to appreciate.

The supper was not by any means a bad one, as Aldrich had looked for it to be, in spite of the white cloth, the solid silver, and beautiful china.

There was a fine broiled fish, a bottle of claret, a roast of venison, fried potatoes, coffee, and a cigar was handed to the deserter when the meal was over.

Aldrich well knew that the china and silver, the tablecloth and napkins had been stolen, and the cigars and claret had been held up on the way destined to some officer of the fort.

In spite of what was before him, however, he enjoyed his supper immensely, ate with the appetite of a hungry man, and puffed away at his cigar as though he had not a care upon earth.

The chief eyed him curiously.

He was struck with the coolness of the young man in the face of the unknown.

He could have appeared indifferent, he knew; but he could not have forced himself to eat such a supper without enjoying it.

There was not the show of nervousness about him.

When he had enjoyed his cigar, Captain Rainbow said:

"Now to work."

"To initiate me into the mysteries of the band?"

"Yes."

"I am ready, sir."

"Can you throw a lasso?"

"I can."

The band was called by a blast from a bugle, and the chief explained that he believed that the young soldier had come to them in good faith, and he intended to accept him as a member of the band—if he stood the tests.

If not, he would have to die.

The deserter did not flinch under the words of the chief.

Whatever emotion he had shown when arrested by the Dread Shots, and the death of his companion, Sergeant Carr, he had now fully mastered himself, and was as cool as an icicle.

The words of the outlaw leader enabled him to at once see the strong power he held over his men.

To become a member they must submit to severe tests, and, failing, they were doomed to die.

Whether any had failed and suffered the penalty the young soldier was soon no longer in doubt of, for the chief said:

"Let me tell you beforehand that as many have failed as have been successful in the tests."

"And have suffered the penalty of failure?" he asked, calmly.

"Oh, yes."

"That is a law we never break."

"I am ready."

"And we are ready as your judges, for the majority of the band decide on a member, for my vote leads off."

The soldier nodded.

Then the chief told a man to hand the applicant for membership several lassoes and allow him to take his choice of them, while a horseman was to ride at full speed up and down in front of him, and within reach of the noose.

The soldier was to throw the lasso as the chief's whim prompted, either to catch the horse upon the leg raised, over the head, or the man around the body, as called out suddenly.

It was to be a severe test, as Aldrich well knew, but he did not shrink from the ordeal, selected a lariat that suited him, and took his stand with the air of a man who had nothing to fear.

Then the order was given to the horseman to start, and when the noose caught the thrower was to release the end, so as to do no harm.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

NIGHT HAWK GEORGE'S FIND.

When Night Hawk George Powell was left alone in his camp, he put things to rights, watered the horses, staked them upon a good grazing ground, and then set about looking over bridles and saddles for anything that needed mending.

He was too thorough a plainsman to be lonely, and as his lot had been the one to remain in camp, he made the best of it in every way.

Many and many a day and night had he thus passed, and when trained in border lore a man becomes as patient, uncomplaining, and long suffering as an Indian.

His duties done, he took his rifle and started off on a search for game.

He was not long in finding a good, large wild turkey, which he brought down with a shot through his head, and a few minutes after a deer fell under his aim.

Carrying his game to camp, he dressed and hung them up, after which he got out his fishing line, found some bait under an old log, and began to fish in a dark pool in the creek.

Here again he was successful, for he soon had a fine string of perch and trout.

These dressed and added to his stores, he concluded he would go down the stream to the trail and see if there were any fresh tracks to show that any one

had been along there since the day before.

It was growing toward sunset, and he did not much expect his pard's pack before the next night.

It was a wise thought to make the observation, for he had not gone two hundred yards from his camp when he suddenly darted down behind a boulder, for coming along the trail on the bank of the stream was a horseman.

Had he not met the scout just there he would soon after have discovered the camp, unseen himself, and retreating, he could have brought a band of Scarlet Scouts upon the lone camper during the night and surprised him.

But the intention of Night Hawk George to go to the trail and look about there had saved him.

The man was an outlaw.

It was the very horseman whom Surgeon Frank Powell had seen ride through the tunnel, apparently going somewhere as messenger for the chief.

Crouching down behind the boulder, in a moment Night Hawk George was ready for business.

The outlaw had evidently come down the trail to the stream, and had then turned up the bank.

But why, if he was going to Dark Days Camp, as Surgeon Powell had surmised?

As the scout watched his coming he saw that he seemed to be eagerly looking about him.

The outlaw was apparently searching for some one or something.

What could it be?

Halting a hundred yards from where the Dread Shot was concealed, the man began to look about him curiously.

This he did for several minutes.

Then he turned off to the left, rode to a tree on the bank of the stream, where there was a group of rocks scattered about at random, as though washed there by an overflow of the waters at some time long past.

The rocks weighed on an average a couple of hundred pounds each.

There the man dismounted, hitched the stake rope about the tree, and stepping up to one of the rocks, bent over, and with considerable exertion rolled it over.

Then he knelt down and began to dig down into the dirt that had been under the rock.

But before he had been long at this task there fell upon his startled ears Night Hawk Powell's stern command:

"Hands up, or that hole shall be your grave!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE OUTLAWS' TREACHERY.

Night Hawk George had not taken very long to discover just why the man had come up the stream bank, when he saw him ride to the group of rocks and dismount.

He knew that he must be after some treasure, either he had buried there or knew about.

That he was an outlaw Night Hawk George did not know, for the man had not on the red jacket of the Scarlet Scouts.

He might be a miner, the scout at first thought, who had struck it rich by a visit there at some other time, and had come back to reap the benefit of his find.

But a closer look at the man convinced the scout that he was an outlaw, one he had seen with the band in the charge on the rock pile defended by Wild Bill and Texas Jack.

"Yes, horse and man are the same, if the scarlet coat is missing.

"I remember he was next to Captain Rainbow in the charge, for I cannot mistake his face and bearing.

"Then, too, an honest miner would not be up here alone so near the outlaws' retreat and Indian country.

"I'll take the chances and the consequences."

So musing, Night Hawk George slipped from behind the boulder that had concealed him, and, with revolver in hand now, crept up close behind the outlaw.

Suddenly, when within a few feet of him, he covered him with his revolver, and uttered the words that had so startled the man.

Completely surprised, and painfully frightened, the man could not move, further than to look up at his captor.

The tall, sinewy form, the dark, handsome face, the stern lips, and piercing eyes of Night Hawk George told the man that he was in the presence of his master.

"I'll trouble you for those weapons, for then we can talk," and Night Hawk George bent over and picked up the belt of arms the man had taken off and tossed to one side in his work.

"Now, who are you?" asked the scout.

"A miner."

"Where from?"

"Dark Days Camp."

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for some gold a friend of mine buried here once, but he directed me wrong, for none is here."

"I'll help you search later."

"There is no use.

"It is not here."

"You only came to that conclusion after seeing me."

"It is no use looking further."

"We'll see if there is later."

"But who are you?"

"Why, I'm a man on the make."

"I don't understand."

"I'm Captain Rainbow, chief of the Scarlet Scouts."

"You are nothing of the kind, for I—"

"What?"

"I saw him once."

"Very lately, too, when you rode by his side in the charge on Wild Bill and Texas Jack on the rock pile, eh?"

"It is not so!"

"I am no outlaw."

"I know that you are, and more, you are my prisoner."

"Who are you?" gasped the man.

"I am not ashamed of my calling, as you are, so don't mind telling that I am known as Night Hawk George Powell, a scout at the fort under Wild Bill, and I am out on the hunt for just such men as you are."

"I am an honest man."

"Your looks belie you, then.

"But come, up with your hands, for I intend to rope you."

"Say, look here."

"Well?"

"I told you I was a miner from Dark Days Camp, and I am."

"Well?"

"I had a pard there who went wrong, and one day he was shot and knew he had to die."

"Yes."

"Then he confessed to me that he had been secretly a member of the outlaw band of Scarlet Scouts, and told me he had a treasure hidden here somewhere, and how I could find it."

"What to do with it?"

"To keep it, and I tell you now we'll go shares on it."

"Thanks, but I don't take any stock in stolen plunder."

"You won't share, then?"

"No, I want all, and you, too, for I know just what you are."

"Say, pard, don't—"

"Hold out your hands!"

The man raised his hands.

"Hold them out, I say, so I can rope them."

The man slowly lowered his hands, and when they were even with his breast suddenly thrust one into his hunting shirt and dragged out a revolver he had concealed there.

Taken by surprise as he was, Night Hawk George was too quick for him, for his weapon flashed as the outlaw was leveling his.

CHAPTER L.

NIGHT HAWK GEORGE IN LUCK.

So quickly did Night Hawk George have to pull trigger that he had no time to take aim, and had to send his bullet where the muzzle of his revolver was pointing.

The bullet struck the man in the body, and as he staggered back he also pulled trigger.

It was a close call for Night Hawk George, for the ball grazed his cheek, leaving a line of red, but merely cutting the skin.

Again the scout fired, for the outlaw was still on his feet and very dangerous.

This shot brought him to his knees, and once more he pulled trigger.

The bullet glanced on the belt buckle of the scout, giving him a severe blow that almost knocked him breathless, and striking his revolver from his hand.

As he picked it up again, the man, now on his knees, drew trigger, and, in spite of his wounds, he was a good shot, for the ball clipped the scout upon the neck.

Then Night Hawk George fired, and his bullet tore along the top of the outlaw's head, the shock causing him to fall.

But instantly, with dying energy, he was upon his feet again, and again he fired.

The bullet buried itself in the butt of the rifle swinging at Night Hawk's back, and just visible over his shoulder.

Up to this time neither man had given ground in their desperate duel.

Each fought for life, and the outlaw was showing wonderful nerve and endurance, for he had been three times seriously wounded.

As for the scout, his escapes had been miraculous, as his grazed cheek, the line along his neck, his bent belt buckle, and the bullet in the stock of his rifle testified.

But Night Hawk George was as cool as though at target practice, and when he again pulled trigger, and not a moment too soon, his hand was as firm as a rock, his eye unerring in its aim.

The bullet entered the very centre of the outlaw's forehead.

"Yet, as he fell, his finger pulled the trigger of his revolver, and the bullet cut through the crown of the scout's sombrero.

"Brave as a lion! as plucky a man as I ever met, and a dead shot, too.

"It was the closest call of my life," and Night Hawk George stood looking down upon the dead outlaw.

"This shall be your grave, poor fellow, and this rock your monument.

"It is a pity that you went wrong, for there was the stuff in you to make a noble man."

With this tribute to the dead outlaw, Night Hawk George stepped to the horse hitched to the tree, and undoing the roll of blankets, he spread one on the ground to wrap the body in.

"I don't like searching the dead, but I suppose it should be done, as I might find something useful."

With this he knelt down by the body and began to search it.

First was revealed an under buckskin belt, heavy with gold coin.

Then there was a leather wallet with a considerable sum of greenbacks in it, and these the scout examined closely, muttering:

"Yes, the same kind, as I expected; but valuable, so far as they go."

In the wallet was a letter, and it was sealed.

It was addressed to:

"DICK DAWSON,

"Dark Days Camp.

"Kindness

"Lute Bedford."

"The man not being a United States mail rider, I guess I'll open this," said Night Hawk.

This the scout did, and his dark face flushed and eyes flashed as he read it.

Then he put it back in the wallet, which was carefully placed in his pocket, as though of great value.

A gold watch and chain, a ring, and some gold buttons were all else found on the body.

Then the scout turned to the hole under the rock.

It had been dug down for a couple of feet under the rock, and was a foot wide by several in length, just the shape of the large, flat rock that had been there.

In the hole the scout discovered a leather uniform case, and, taking it out and opening it, the scout seemed surprised at what he beheld.

There was a small satchel, and this was full of valuable jewelry, gems, and trinkets.

Then there were pieces of solid silver plate, forks and spoons, gold watches, miniatures, and many other articles of value.

"Well, this looks like a pawnbrokers' shop had been raided; but I know what it all means, for it's the treasure of Major Baldwin's bride, which the outlaws robbed her of on her way to the fort.

"That man got hold of it in some way, and hid it all from his companions, and I guess, with what he had with him, was going to dig this up and light out for other parts.

"But won't the major and his wife be glad to get it back!

"Yes, here is the major's pocketbook, too, and it's got plenty of money.

"You struck it rich, outlaw, and so did I."

CHAPTER LI.

THE OUTLAW CHIEF'S LETTER

The valuables found in the hiding place were all put back in the uniform case by Night Hawk George, and the outlaw's belt and wallet as well, the letter only being left out.

Then the hole was enlarged, and the body of the outlaw was wrapped in one of his blankets and decently laid to rest.

Where he had hidden his stolen booty was to be his grave.

The threat of Night Hawk George had thus been carried out.

The grave was filled in, the earth scattered that was left over, and with apparently little exertion the rock was raised and put back over it.

Then, with the case in his hand, the scout mounted the outlaw's horse and rode back to his camp.

There the saddle and bridle were thrown into the stream, the tail of the animal bobbed, and mane roached, so that the horse was completely disguised, after which he was staked out with the others.

It was night, now, and the scout cooked his supper, and a good one.

He also laid out the fish and venison for supper for the others, should they come in, and then went over the things he had found, making a list of everything.

This done, he lighted his pipe and sat in deep meditation for a long time.

"Guess they won't be in to-night," he said at last, and was preparing to adjourn to his blanket bed when he heard voices.

Instantly he recognized the voice of his brother, and a moment after he came up, with Wild Bill and Texas Jack.

"We are as hungry as bears in spring-time, George," said Surgeon Powell, and Night Hawk at once set to work to get a good supper for them.

"We have good news, too, Pard George," remarked Wild Bill.

"You bet we have," added Texas Jack. "Well, take a plunge in the stream, and you'll feel better, and certainly look cleaner, while I get supper, and I've got fish, bacon, venison steaks, and roast turkey, not to speak of potatoes, hoe-cake, raw onions, and coffee, and the

Golden Gate Inn can't beat the set out," said Night Hawk George.

At the promise of this feast the three pards took their bath, made their toilet, and were ready when the supper was.

It was eaten with a gusto, and then followed the tale of the tramp after the outlaws.

Night Hawk George listened attentively, asked a few questions, and then said: "I've got something to tell, too."

They had not expected this.

But his story was told, the scratch on face and neck shown, the mark on the belt buckle, hole through his hat, and the bullet in the butt of the rifle.

The three trampers gazed with wonder, which increased as they heard his story of the desperate duel and saw what booty he had to reveal.

"It was the man I saw come through the cavern, from your description, George," said Surgeon Powell.

"Now to the letter he carried," returned Night Hawk, and he read it aloud, as follows:

"Camp—Sunday.

"Dick:

"We are again in camp, and I regret to say that the news you gave us of the Four Dread Shot Scouts carrying the deserters to the fort panned out badly for us.

"Those fellows are devils, for they checked us at the stream, beat us back when we attacked them at the rock pile, where they took refuge, and again in the morning, they, having had aid from the fort.

"We pushed out for camp, after a loss of eight killed and several wounded.

"They did not follow, as far as we know; but before we left we had come into camp the youngest of deserters, who had escaped from them, or claimed to have done so, and we caught him marking the trail as we came along, so I roped him.

"He has joined us, but I am afraid of him, and I wish you to learn his record, for he will tell me nothing.

"If he shows the cloven foot that ends it for him, as you know; but I hope he is square, for I like him.

"Now, to another thing.

"The Four Dread Shots certainly knew of our coming after them, and I believe that Giant Negro was the informer.

"I saw him after leaving you, and think he overheard what we said.

"Then, my men twice saw him hovering about us on the march.

"Find out where his cabin is, and we will visit him with a purpose, for I believe he is thought to have considerable gold.

"Another thing.

"If the Four Dread Shots come again to Dark Days, send us word at once by Jerry, and we'll see that they never reach the fort again.

"Again, Dick, find out all you can about Kid Glove Kate, for I feel sure I know that woman.

"Lute will hand you this, and will wait a few days for the news you have to send.

Yours,
"R— of S. C."

This letter was a revelation and a joy to the Four Dread Shots, and Wild Bill said with more excitement than he ever before was guilty of:

"To Dark Days Camp we start in the morning!"

CHAPTER LII.

THE TEST OF MEMBERSHIP.

When the man on horseback, in obedience to the orders of Captain Rainbow, started for his dash past the deserter, swinging his lasso, the latter was so easy and cool about it that the outlaws did not believe he would make a good throw.

But the coil was cast, the noose caught over the head of the horse, as the chief called out, and the outlaws put it down to luck.

Again the horse started at full speed.

"Man's head!" shouted the chief.

The noose caught as told.

Once more a start.

"Left hind leg!" cried the chief.

The man caught it.

"That will do, for no one can do better with a lariat," said the chief.

Then a man was led out of one of the cabins.

He was blindfolded, and the young deserter saw that he was not one of the band.

Without doubt he was a prisoner, for his face was white and haggard, his beard of a couple of months' growth, and he was by no means prepossessing looking, for his clothes were too large for him.

"Place the target for rifle," ordered the chief, and a block painted white was put upon the head of the man, who stood one hundred yards off.

"Fire!" called out the chief, and the block was knocked off of the head of the trembling prisoner, and when picked up the bullet was found in its centre.

Thrown then into the air, the block had another bullet put into it.

"You are a great rifle shot.

"Now to see what you can do with the revolver," said the chief.

The prisoner was now placed at twenty steps, and a potato, cut square off on one end, was put upon his head.

"Fire!"

With the word the revolver cracked and the potato flew to pieces.

"You are the best shot in my camp, young man."

"Thank you.

"I learned in a thorough school."

"What school?"

"The army."

"Then you can wield a sword?"

"Yes."

"Martin, you try him."

The outlaw called to brought two rapiers of the same length.

The deserter took one and faced him, the blades crossed, and the outlaw's weapon was wrenched from his hand and thrown twenty feet away.

The outlaws cheered, while Martin scowled and said:

"I was not ready.

"He was too quick."

The weapon was again handed to him, and once more it went flying from his hand.

"Teach me that trick, and I'll forgive you," said the outlaw.

"Certainly, pard, any time you care to learn," was the reply.

Then came a test of strength with an evil-faced outlaw, who looked as though he could crush the young soldier.

But he did not even get a grip on him before he was thrown with a force that knocked the breath out of him.

"You will do.

"You are a marvel; but there is another test, and the worst."

"I am ready."

"I have here in camp the only traitor our band ever had."

"Yes."

"He was caught playing your game."

"What was that?"

"Deserting."

"Ah!"

"That meant death.

"But he was held until our return to camp.

"Now he is to be executed."

"Yes."

"You are to be his executioner."

A slight paleness of the lips was the only sign the young deserter revealed of how this struck him.

The man was brought out, and at a glance the deserter recognized him as one who had escaped from the fort where he had been stationed.

He had made his escape the night before he was to be hanged, and had killed the guard to do so.

He gave no sign of recognition, however, as he gazed upon the low-browed, evil, crime-hued countenance.

"You are to shoot him in the back."

"That I will not do, chief.

"I will shoot no man in the back," was the stern response.

The chief's face flushed, and all the outlaws looked at him.

"Very well, shoot him where you please; but he has got to die, for he robbed all of his comrades, myself included, and very nearly made his escape.

"Are you ready?"

"I am."

The man did not beg.

He knew it was useless.

He scowled savagely and was silent.

The deserter stood fifteen paces from him and waited for the word.

"Ready!"

"Aim!"

"Fire!"

The revolver was leveled, fired, and the bullet entered the man's forehead, just between the eyes.

"You have won, young man.

"You have but to take the written oath, and you are a member of the band of Scarlet Scouts," said the chief.

CHAPTER LIII.

BEFORE HIS ACCUSERS.

The calm submission of the Black Butcher was a surprise to Tom Talbot and his men. They had expected a very desperate encounter when they bearded him in his den; but they were honest men, they felt that they had been wronged.

They had found the body of Hal Burton, as they had reported, and to be accused of his murder and robbery caused them to feel that the mystery attending the affair must be cleared up, and especially that they might be set aright in the camps.

The men had really seen the Giant Negro near the scene, he must have come right from the spot where the tragedy had happened, and they therefore were suspicious that he knew about the murder.

If not, let him clear himself of the suspicion, they thought.

So the Giant Negro was bound securely, and the men camped at his cabin until the following morning, when, after breakfast, they started for Dark Days Headquarters with their prisoner.

The Black Butcher took his capture quietly.

He only said that he had not killed Hal Burton, and that he knew nothing to tell them.

As to his having robbed the body, he was indignant at the charge that he would be guilty of such a deed, or else he feigned well what he pretended to feel.

On the way to the camps he rode quietly along, his face revealing nothing of what he might think.

When some of the miners saw Tom Talbot and his pards returning with the huge negro a prisoner, they turned and went back with them to the camps.

Others at work soon heard that the Black Butcher had been arrested by Tom Talbot and his men, and was accused of the murder of Hal Burton.

They also hastened to the centre of the camps, which was, of course, the Friendly Glass Saloon, and the Golden Gate Inn.

It did not take long for the news to spread to the furthest camp, and men were seen hastening away from work to join the throng at the inn.

It was well for Tom Talbot and his four pards that they had not gone to the Friendly Glass Inn on the night before, but had slipped off, after Hal Burton's funeral, to go on the hunt of the real murderers.

Had they gone to the saloon there would have been trouble, for, honest and square as they had been considered, there were many who really believed that they had killed Burton and knew the fate of his brother Nat.

A council had been held by a number

of prominent miners during the evening, and it had been decided to put Tom Talbot and his four comrades on trial for the killing of the Burtons.

They were to be arrested the following night, when they came to the Friendly Glass Saloon, and made to prove their innocence or suffer for their supposed guilt.

The men of Dark Days had a way of attending to such matters in a very decided, prompt, and summary way, and the universal verdict was "guilt," when a man could not prove, to everybody's satisfaction, that he was not guilty.

Tom Talbot and his companions had therefore anticipated the men who were to arrest them, by coming in with the Black Butcher.

It was remembered that they had said two nights before that they had seen the Black Butcher near the spot where they had found the body of Hal Burton.

As they brought in the one they accused of murder, and it happened to be no less a personage than the Black Butcher, the crime was taken from their shoulders and placed upon the broad shoulders of the Giant Negro.

Arriving at the Golden Gate Inn, Tom Talbot boldly accused the negro of the murder of Hal Burton, and said:

"And here he is to answer to the charge."

CHAPTER LIV.

THE BORDER TRIAL.

The Black Butcher was brought in by the Tom Talbot party and carried up to the large open space before the Golden Gate Inn and Friendly Glass Saloon.

The crowd began to assemble rapidly, and all eyes turned upon the huge negro, and then to Tom Talbot and his pards for an explanation.

How it was that the negro had been taken, and bound as he was, without killing some one of the band, or being desperately wounded himself, could not be understood.

But there were Tom Talbot and his four companions beyond a doubt, and they showed no traces of having been in a desperate encounter.

Had the negro lost his pluck and prowess?

Had his defeat by Wild Bill, the Dead Shot Scout, completely broken his nature and cowed him to become as docile as a lamb?

It certainly looked so, for he stood calmly among his captors, making no effort to resist and with no show of anger or alarm upon his black, strongly marked face.

Straight to Dave Clagett's house Tom Talbot made his way.

The landlord was one of the party who had the night before come to the conclusion that the Talbot party must do something to clear themselves of the suspicion cast upon them by finding Hal Burton's body in the way they had.

Now Dave Clagett and the other leaders in Dark Days were grouped together and Tom Talbot said:

"Pard Clagett, you and others have been anxious to know more than we could tell you, my pards and I, of the death of Hal Burton, and as we told all we knew, and you were not satisfied, we went on the hunt for one who ought to be able to say what happened, for we saw him coming away from the spot where we found the body, and not very long after the killing; either."

The landlord looked at Talbot and then at the negro before he replied; then he said:

"If the Black Butcher knows more, I believe he will tell it; but, as circumstantial evidence holds you and your friends under suspicion, the same may apply to him."

"He may be as innocent as we are, Pard Clagett, but find out what you can from him, for you have heard our story, and if he is not guilty, then I am greatly surprised, for that was no place for

him to be alone that time of night, for his cabin is in the opposite direction."

"Then you turn him over as a prisoner?"

"I do."

"And you charge him with the murder and robbery of Hal Burton, and the mysterious disappearance of Nat Burton?"

"I do not make the direct charge, save that he was there ahead of us; he disappeared soon after from his camp, and has not been to his cabin for several days.

"It may be only, as you said, circumstantial evidence, and for his sake I hope he can prove his innocence; but as we know we are not guilty, we believe he is, and Heaven forgive us if we wrong him."

The negro had uttered no word, but remained passive through all that had been said.

"Gentlemen," and Dave Clagett turned to the crowd, "I desire to select a jury of twelve good men and true from among you. As I know you all, I will name you, and each man will step up here as his name is called."

The names of a dozen men were called, they stepping out as named, and all were soon arranged in a row on the piazza of the inn, which was raised several feet above the ground.

A bench was given them, and a chair was brought for Dave Clagett, who was to be the judge, the prisoner being expected to stand, bound as he was, for the crowd knew him too well to wish to see him free.

"Now, gentlemen, I have to say that you all know of the murder and robbery of one of the noblest of our comrades, and the disappearance of another one, his brother.

"Suspicion has fallen upon five men who have stood in our midst, and they wishing to clear their names of the stain, have brought before us the man they deem guilty of the double crime.

"You see him before you, in the person of the negro known as the Black Butcher.

"You know what his character has been, and I would say that the proofs against him of guilt come from Tom Talbot and his four comrades, the five men who found the body of Hal Burton.

"Now, gentlemen of the jury, I will separate these five men, and then call upon each one to tell his story, and mark well if they differ in what they have to say."

This dividing their party seemed a surprise to Talbot and his men, but they submitted without a word, each man being kept apart and out of hearing of the testimony given.

CHAPTER LV.

GUILTY.

The Black Butcher apparently was the least interested one present in all that was taking place. He stood with his back against the log wall of the inn and his eyes idly roamed over the crowd of faces before him.

He met here and there faces that scowled upon him, already adjudging him guilty, but he heeded them not.

If any looks of sympathy were bestowed upon him, he did not see them.

The crowd recalled him as the Black Butcher, as a negro who had come into their midst and remained unknown.

He was known to be a giant in strength, a devil in nature if aroused.

It was said that he had struck it rich and had laid up a fortune, for he always had plenty of money.

But no one knew as to the fortune. He lived alone and dug for gold alone. He had been in many fights, and there was quite a group of graves in Trail End Camp which he had been the making of.

He was as desperate as a wounded grizzly in a fight, and had a nerve of iron, the courage of a mountain lion.

On the other hand, it was known that

he was strongly generous; that his hand was always in his pocket to help one in need. And further, if men stopped to think, they could not recall that he had ever wronged anyone, nor had he begun a quarrel, nor left it if forced upon him until he saw the end, the bitter end for his foe.

He was a wild rider, a dead shot, a desperate hand with any weapon.

Such was the man who faced the crowd charged with murder and robbery.

He did not even look revengeful toward the witnesses, his captors, for he seemed to feel that they were working to save themselves from hanging.

Tom Talbot was the first man called, and then Dave Clagett, acting as judge, said:

"Prisoner, what is your plea, guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," was the deep-voiced response.

"In the sight of God you assert it?"

"Yes, and in the face of man."

This reply caused a suppressed excitement, and the judge, turning to the witness, said:

"Tom Talbot, tell what you know about the murder of Hal Burton, the Good Samaritan, his robbery, and the disappearance of Nat Burton."

"Nothing whatever do I know about the murder and robbery, but I do know about the finding of Hal Burton's body and why I suspect the prisoner of being his murderer."

"Tell your story then, and remember that you stand in the presence of High Heaven and the eyes of the citizens of Dark Days are upon you."

In a few terse words Tom Talbot told how one of his comrades had struck some gold while on a hunt in the mountains, and had guided himself and three comrades there.

The gold had not panned out as they had hoped, and they were pushing back by night to their cabin, when in the open north of the spur, near the home of Kid Glove Kate, they had come upon the Black Butcher.

He was just coming out of the timber, and when they spoke to him, asking where he was going, he made a reply none of them understood, and pushed on at the same rapid pace at which he had been going.

As the timber was so dark one could not see his hand before him, they had lighted a lantern and were going slowly along, half a mile from where they had met the Black Butcher, when one of the party suddenly discovered a body lying on one side of the trail.

Flashing the lantern upon the body, they all recognized Hal Burton, and there was a bullet wound in his breast, while he had been robbed of all that was valuable.

They had at once carried his body to the Burton cabin, but not finding Nat there, had taken it to their home, and the next day brought it in to Dark Days and reported their discovery.

This was his story, and as they were not guilty they had concluded that the Black Butcher must be; hence their capture of him.

"You have heard, gentlemen of the jury. Now we will hear what another of the band of five has to say," said Dave Clagett.

Another one of Talbot's party was then called, and his story did not differ in the slightest.

So it was with the next and the next. Not one of the stories differed in the slightest particular, and the crowd was convinced that Tom Talbot and his men told the truth.

Then the "judge" made his charge, and it was impartial—the landlord did not wish to lose the patronage of the party that was not hanged.

The jury was not long in arriving at a conclusion as to who was guilty.

There were men in the jury who thought it would be safe for themselves if the Black Butcher was in his grave.

So it was a unanimous verdict of "Guilty."

This verdict was as good as a sentence to hang, and at once arose a wild shout that increased to a roar:

"Hang him! hang him!"

CHAPTER LVI.

A FATAL QUARREL.

When Brace Barnes and his party fled from the anger of Kid Glove Kate, it was with dread that bullets would be sent flying after them.

Barnes had seized the body of his slain comrade for two reasons, one being to carry it off as a proof of what the woman had done, and the other to shield himself with it from flying lead.

He had a run of several hundred yards before he reached a place of shelter, but even weighted down as he was, he managed to keep pretty close up with his companions.

When at last he saw that he was not fired upon, and the dog was not even on his track, he halted and essayed to speak.

But he was panting like a hard run horse, and the others were in little better condition.

But for the dead body lying near them the scene would have been ludicrous, for they could only pant and look.

At last Barnes was able to speak between his hard drawn breath.

"Pards, we have been beaten."

"Sartain."

"That woman is the devil."

"A holy terror."

"She killed that poor fellow there as she would have shot a deer."

"That's her blooming style, Pard Brace."

"She would have surely killed us."

"Only we didn't wait."

"I followed you."

"And kept well up, but it was kind of you to bring that body," and the speaker winked at the others.

"I did not wish the dog to tear it to pieces."

"It wouldn't have hurt the body, but my! what teeth he had, and they'd feel awful in the rear of a sensitive man on the jump."

Brace Barnes saw that he had not fooled his companions a little bit, so he said, lightly:

"Well, she beat us, and we all stampeded, but we have the body, and we'll camp and take it in to-morrow to show the boys, and I'll make the open charge that she killed Hal Burton."

"Better be out of her range when you make it"

"She won't be there, but Dave Clagett will have to send for her, and then we'll see if her claws cannot be clipped."

"She's a woman, pard."

"She's the devil."

"Correct! but will the boys want to see a woman git inter trouble?"

"If she has done what a man would be hanged for, yes."

"She killed Hal Burton, I am sure, and I tell you now I'm going to push it against her for all there is in it."

"Either Kid Glove Kate leaves Dark Days Camp or I do."

"They've got a way of sending a man out by the Railroad Rope Line, and into Trails End Camp," said one who had not before spoken.

The remark caused a shudder all around, but Brace Barnes said:

"Well, I'll take all chances to get rid of that woman."

"For Hal Burton's sake, I s'poses."

"Yes, and to find his brother Nat."

"Your ears hain't got nothin' ter do with it, have they?" asked the man who seemed anxious to joke his leader.

"Yes, they have, for she has branded me for life," was the fierce reply.

"I thought you was in love with her a short while since."

"See here, Abe Johnson, there is such a thing as going too far."

"Maybe so; but I knew yer thought

yer was a masher, and tried it on Kid Glove Kate, and it didn't go a little bit.

"I has heerd yer call her a Angil in Petticoats and say how she would be Mrs. Kate Barnes some day."

"Now yer is hunting her down like a coyote, and because you is afeerd of her yer wants to have the men of Dark Days hit her hard."

"I tell yer, Brace Barnes, I admires a game man, and that pretty gal has got more gameness than any man I knows, and for one I doesn't want ter see her parsecuted."

The man had risen from the ground and spoken earnestly, his hand hovering near the butt of a revolver.

But Brace Barnes did not reply. He sat quietly as though considering what had been said.

But at last he spoke, and as though he had not been angered by the words of Abe Johnson:

"So that is the way you feel about it, Abe Johnson?"

"It be."

"Then you've got no business in our company."

The man had risen now, and his calm utterance had taken Abe Johnson off his guard. He had just time to draw his revolver at the significant words of Brace Barnes, when the latter leveled and fired.

The bullet sped true, but Abe Johnson fired as he fell, and his bullet very nearly killed his slayer, for it grazed his temple.

"Pards, there is another body to lay at the door of Kid Glove Kate. We will take them into Dark Days to-morrow, and I'll hang if I don't destroy that woman. Now to our cabin," and the three men took turns in shouldering the two bodies to their lone camp.

CHAPTER LVII.

A WOMAN'S HEART.

A scornful smile passed over the face of Kid Glove Kate as she saw the flight of her foes.

She watched them until they were out of sight, and then she said, bitterly:

"It seems that I cannot escape my fate. My mission is to kill."

Then she turned to the dog crouching near her, and knelt by him while she examined the wound he had received.

The bullet had struck him on the top of his head, glancing along the scalp and passing on without doing serious harm.

The dog had been rendered insensible for awhile, but now trotted back to the cabin by the side of his mistress, and patiently allowed her to dress the wound and tie it up, which she did with the skill and nerve of a trained nurse.

Leaving Nemesis on guard, she then entered the cabin.

There was the sound of hard breathing from the adjoining room, and entering it upon tip-toe she approached the bed, and bent over a form lying there.

The light was dim, but the face of Nat Burton was recognizable, though it was haggard now and flushed with high fever.

The woman's touch was soft and soothing as she placed her hand upon his head and gently stroked it.

Then she begun to bathe it, and, as she did so, she murmured words of endearment in a low, trembling tone, ending with:

"Yes, the firing did not disturb you, and your fever is not so high. I will save you, Nat; yes, save you, for you must not, shall not, die!"

As she spoke she bent over, and her lips touched the fevered brow of the man.

What a contrast to the woman at bay a few moments before, sending a bullet to take the life of a man!

Now her eyes were softened in expression, and her voice was sweet and low.

The true woman of her nature was

awakened; the bitterness of her life seemed to fade away, and she was far more beautiful than when she faced a crowd in her brilliant, daring, defiant way. It was not Kid Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler of Dark Days, but the woman in her home, full of sympathy, full of love.

Arranging the pillows comfortably, still wearing her close-fitting kid gloves, though now attired in a house dress, neat and becoming, she gave her unconscious patient more medicine, bending her ear to catch his low, delirious ravings, for often he would talk of scenes of the past, and she appeared to love to hear all he said.

Going out of the room, she attended to her household duties, and when night came had her supper and then sat down and picked up her guitar.

Soft and low she sang in a voice rich in melody and plaintive.

The hard breathing of the man ceased under its influence, and he dropped off into a natural sleep.

Then she arose and paced the room to and fro.

Her face was hard in expression; her lips were firmly set, for her thoughts had brought up once more all the fierce impulses of her nature.

At last she murmured aloud:

"This all must end soon; yes, very soon. He will not die; I know that he will not; then my life will change, will go out of its cruel bitterness into one that is placid at least, if not happy.

"How can I ever be happy with the hampering memories that flock into heart and brain?

"Will those memories down at will, when I have put behind me the scenes of this unwomanly life I am forced to lead here in these wilds, one woman, girl, I may say, amid half a thousand desperate men?

"A woman, too, who holds a record as a man killer!

"But the end must be near. I feel it; I know it, and when my life desires a change, then revenge will have been mine!

"Now I must retire, for I must not lose my sleep.

With this she again visited her patient and found him sleeping well.

Returning to the other room she darkened her light, saw that Nemesis was on guard at the door, and then lay down to sleep.

Haunting memories seemed not to disturb her slumbers, for she slept soundly.

Bright and early she was up, her patient cared for, breakfast had, and soon after she mounted her horse and started for Dark Days Camp for some needed supplies, once more Kid Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler.

CHAPTER LVIII.

SHADOWED.

When Chief Rainbow told the deserter that he had surely stood the test of membership in the band of Scarlet Scouts, the young man looked pleased, and said he was ready to subscribe to the oath.

He was at once led to the cabin of Captain Rainbow, the latter taking from a drawer a paper and handing it to him with the remark:

"This is the oath.

"You are to copy it and then swear to it in my presence, when it will be filed against you with the others—see, I have them all," and he showed a package containing a number of papers folded up.

The deserter sat at the table, took up a pen, arranged a sheet of paper, and opening the "Outlaw's Oath of Office," as it was called, read it carefully.

The chief did not see his face change color as he read it, and said:

"Now write it."

The deserter began to write, and his face paled slightly as he did so.

The oath was as follows:

"I, Alfred Aldrich, do hereby pledge myself for life or death to the League of the Scarlet Scouts, swearing by all I hold dear in Heaven and on Earth, by any memory of loved ones, dead or living, by the honor of her who gave me birth, by my every hope of Hereafter, to keep this oath inviolate, or submit myself to the doom that awaits its breaking."

It was a terrible oath, and yet with a hand in which there was not the slightest tremor the young deserter began to write.

But what he wrote was not the oath. On the contrary, it was far different, as will be seen.

He had made up his mind to take desperate chances.

Alone with the chief, he had noticed that the latter had removed his belt of arms, and was seated, half dozing, in his easy chair.

None of the outlaws were near enough to the cabin for their voices even to be heard.

The young deserter was playing a bold game in the very face of death!

Upon the table where he wrote lay a heavy iron bar. It would be useful as a weapon.

The young man wrote while the chief half slept.

What he wrote was as follows:

"I, Alfred Aldrich, do hereby pledge my life to the destruction of Captain Rainbow and his heinous followers, who have so long defied the laws, committing crimes that cause the men of even this wild land to turn pale with dread, and who are merciless alike to man and woman, defying all law that awaits their breaking."

This bold document, so widely different from the Outlaw's Oath of Office, Alfred Aldrich signed and called out:

"It is written, Captain Rainbow."

"All right.

"Do you, with uplifted hands, subscribe to what you have written?" sleepily asked the captain.

Raising his hands the deserter said firmly:

"I most solemnly do!"

"All right; fold up the paper and put it with the others."

"Yes, sir."

"Then go out and look up Lute Bedford, and tell him I wish him to be ready to start for Dark Days Camp as a messenger to-morrow afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

"I have lost so much sleep I will retire, and do not wish to be disturbed, so do not waken me when you come in, for your room is next to this, as you are to be my secretary and aide."

"Thank you, sir."

The deserter went out of the cabin, looked up Lute Bedford and told him what the chief had said.

Then he moved about the camp, getting acquainted with the men, all of whom seemed to feel an admiration for him, after what they had seen him do.

He dug the grave himself of the traitor outlaw he had killed, all the time fully conscious that the chief might take a notion to look over those papers and read what kind of an oath he really had subscribed to.

The traitor outlaw buried, he turned in and, tired as he was, was soon fast asleep.

The chief did not get up to breakfast, preferring to take his ease, and only arose late in the afternoon.

Then he called for Lute Bedford and gave him the letter, which the reader has already heard read in the camp of the Dread Shots, and which Night Hawk George had taken from the dead outlaw.

As soon as Lute Bedford had started, Captain Rainbow said:

"Aldrich, I have reason to believe that Bedford got some booty he hid and did not turn into our treasury, and I wish you to follow him.

"It will be well for you to disguise

yourself, for we have all kinds here, and you must not be known to either Bedford or the people of Dark Days, after your arrest by Wild Bill."

"No, sir."

"Shadow Bedford to Dark Days, or rather follow him there, though not allowing him to see you, and find out just what he does while there, returning after he does and reporting to me."

"Yes, sir."

The deserter, a couple of hours after the departure of the outlaw messenger, mounted a good horse, and, thoroughly disguised, started upon the trail.

But at a point where he could get a good look back for miles over the trail he had come he halted and turned a field glass along it.

"As I expected," he muttered. "I am also shadowed, and by the chief, for I know him in spite of his disguise as an old trapper.

"There will be some surprises for Dark Days, I'm thinking."

CHAPTER LIX.

SHADOWED AND SHADOWER.

The young deserter had certainly played a very desperate game to carry out the intention he had in view of the destruction of the band of Scarlet Scouts.

Whatever his part, whether the reason of his desertion and after life, what the secret might be that he held so closely, he certainly was firm in his intention to run down Captain Rainbow and his men.

Had the captain looked at the paper he had written, how quickly his death would have followed, Alfred Aldrich well knew.

But he fearlessly and defiantly took the chances of discovery.

Had Rainbow discovered it while in his chair, the deserter had made up his mind to kill him there and then with the iron bar and take the risk of escape.

Starting upon the trail of Luke Bedford, the messenger, there had been enough of daylight remaining for him to see that he was shadowed.

He had been just long enough in the outlaws' camp to take in all that was there. He had seen in the chief's wardrobe a number of disguises, and noted them well.

There were saddles and bridles there, uniforms and various suits of clothes, one in particular being of buckskin, and just such from hat to boots that an old trapper would wear.

The hat, weapons and all were with it, and more, there were bundles of pelts of beaver, otter and other animals, all dried and baled up for transportation.

There were prisoners in the camp, a dozen in number, held for ransom and other reasons.

The young deserter saw stored there a quantity of goods that had been taken from a Government wagon train, and a hundred fine mules that belonged to the army, with a number of horses, were feeding in the valley.

With the chief he took particular notice that there were just twenty-three outlaws in the retreat, and several of them were wounded.

A pair of six-pounder brass cannon, carbines and infantry rifles, with revolvers and swords, were in great number.

The two cannon were in position, too, to beat back an attacking foe.

Having noticed all these facts, the deserter was glad to so soon get the chance to act, by being sent to Dark Days by the chief.

"I will write to Surgeon Powell, and enclose a map of the trail, and have him come and attack the stronghold by night.

"I will be on the watch for their coming and guide them to the camp after a certain date.

"I only wish the Surgeon Scout and

his companions were in Dark Days, so I would not have to return to the stronghold unless with a large force to capture it. But I'll take all risks."

Having seen that he was being followed, and confident that it was by the chief, the deserter rode on in the gathering gloom of night.

He crossed the stream on which was the camp of the Dread Shots, and, of course, did not see the trail of Luke Bedford, when he turned off to go after his hidden booty.

Continuing on until he came to another stream, he went off from the trail a short distance and went into camp for the night, building a fire so that the shadower could see it and not pass him in the darkness.

Having had his supper, he threw his blankets in the shadow, and then slipped away, regained the trail and started back on foot.

It was not long before he came in sight of a glimmer of light.

A camp was up a bend of the stream less than a mile from his own.

Creeping nearer he discovered a horse and a large mule staked out, and saw the pretended trapper busy with his supper.

There was a pack saddle near the mule, and it was heavy with pelts.

The saddle, bridle and whole outfit were weather-worn and old.

In the camp the man had thrown off his disguise of a rough beard, wig, old slouch hat and muffler about the neck he had worn.

The deserter had made no mistake, for the face of the chief was revealed.

"He saw my fire and came back here to camp."

"He will reach Dark Days to-morrow night soon after I do, and I will not be very long behind Luke Bedford, for he will camp for the night somewhere, as it is best to go into the camps under cover of darkness to help our disguise."

He little knew that Luke Bedford had already camped upon his last trail.

Returning to his camp he slept through the night, and in his disguise of a rough looking miner resumed his ride to Dark Days just as the sun rose.

And several miles behind on his trail came his shadower, Captain Rainbow.

CHAPTER LX.

A VOICE THAT WAS HEARD.

"Hang him! hang him!" cried the men of Dark Days, when the jury had pronounced the Black Butcher guilty of the murder of Hal Burton.

"Pards, I didn't kill him! Before the Lord I didn't!" cried the negro, now speaking for the first time. He realized that he was in the hands of a merciless mob, that his life would be taken.

He had not before believed that they would find him guilty upon no other evidence than that he was near the scene of Hal Burton's death.

"Were you not where these men have said that you were?" asked David Claggett, sternly.

"Yes, I was, boss."

"What were you doing there?"

"I had a duty to perform, and I was on my way to do it."

"Did you see the body, or pass it?"

All breathlessly awaited the reply.

The negro had admitted being near the scene, so what would he answer to the curt question of Dave Claggett?

"I didn't pass the body, and I didn't see it, for it was too dark; but I know'd it was thar."

"You knew it was there?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you shot that noble man and robbed his body?"

"It's a lie as black as my face is, for I didn't kill him, and I didn't rob him."

"Do you know who did kill him?"

Again there was suppressed excitement awaiting the answer.

"I do know, boss!"

"Who was it?"

"I won't tell; but it warn't no murder."

"You know?"

"I does, boss."

"But refuse to tell?"

"I'll die fust."

"Then you will have to die if you refuse."

"I expects to."

"You feel that you should hang?"

"No, I don't, nuther."

"What, then?"

"I don't expect no marcy from men when they gets on ther track of a human being like coyotes does."

"You have been justly tried, and the jury has found you guilty of the murder of Hal Burton, a man so noble that his good deeds had gained for him the name of the Good Samaritan. What have you to say to that?"

"He was a mighty good man, boss."

"What else have you to say as to the witnesses?"

"They told the truth, boss."

"And what about the jury?"

"The jury lied," was the cool response.

"You accuse the jury of lying?"

"Yes."

"They accused me of killing Hal Burton, and it is a lie."

"Yet you say you know who killed him?"

"I does."

"And refuse to tell?"

"I does."

"Do you know anything about Nat Burton?"

"I does."

"Where is he?"

"I won't tell."

"Is he dead or alive?"

"I has nothin' ter say, boss."

"Remember, you are sentenced to be hanged."

"That's all right."

"You do not fear to die?"

"I has seen so many men die, it looks kinder easy like, boss, and it don't scare me," was the fearless rejoinder.

"Will you tell what you know if your life is spared?"

"No."

"Remember, if I spare your life, will you tell who killed Hal Burton, and what became of his brother?"

"It hain't going to be spared."

"Why not?"

"Them coyotes smells blood, and they can't be driven off where it's a man to hang."

The crowd broke forth in a yell at these words.

They had been patient and quiet, hoping that the Giant Black would tell what he knew.

But now that he refused, and even spoke of them as coyotes thirsting for his blood, they would stand it no more, and again arose the cry:

"Hang him!"

Once more, as they pressed toward the negro, Dave Claggett calmed them, for he called out:

"Men, we must know what he has to tell. If you silence his lips by death we will find out nothing."

"All right; be quick about it!" shouted a miner, and he voiced the rest of the crowd.

"Once more, and for the last time, man, I give you a chance for your life by telling what you know about the murder of Hal Burton and the disappearance of Nat."

"What have you to say?"

"Nothing."

"You will hang then."

"I can't help it—I'll die game."

The crowd was making a rush for the negro, when a horse was suddenly spurred among the men and a voice called out:

"Hold! You shall not hang that man for killing Hal Burton, for he is not guilty!"

It was Kid Glove Kate who spoke, and she sat upon her horse, a cocked revolver in each hand.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE CONFESSION.

The scene was a thrilling one. The crowd was as silent as the tomb.

Every eye was upon the woman, who had faced her horse toward the piazza, unmindful of the hard knocks he gave the men who barred her way.

The face of Kid Glove Kate was as white as that of a corpse, but her lips were set, her eyes burning fiercely, and she looked the one to do anything she threatened.

Her coming had certainly calmed the crowd momentarily.

Could she control those spirits further? As the men gazed upon her, they waited for her to speak.

Her bosom heaved convulsively, but otherwise she was perfectly calm outwardly.

Seeing that she hesitated, Dave Claggett spoke.

"You say the negro is not guilty, Kid Glove Kate?"

"He is not."

"He did not kill Hal Burton and rob him, and cause the disappearance of Nat Burton, as the jury has decided?"

"He did not. Like half the farces called trial by jury, your twelve fools have gone wrong, and would hang the wrong person, kill an innocent man, innocent at least of the crime you are trying to fasten upon him, simply because you do not know who else to accuse."

"Then you know who is the guilty one?"

"I do, if there is guilt in it, as you see Hal Burton's death."

"Don't tell 'em, Missy Kate, for it tain't none of ther business!" called out the Black Butcher.

"I will tell them, though you would not. You are black of face, though not of heart, if men do call you the Butcher."

"You would not betray the secret you held, and would have died before you did."

"Thankee, Missy Kate, but I wasn't going to tell."

"God bless you for it!" said the woman, for an instant threatening to break down.

But, she rallied quickly, and said:

"I tell you that the Black Butcher is not guilty."

"Set him free, Dave Claggett!"

"Not until you tell us who is guilty, Kid Glove Kate!" shouted a voice in the crowd.

"I tell you that he is not guilty!"

"We must know all, then, or the crowd will hang the Black Butcher, Kid Glove Kate," asserted Dave Claggett, decisively.

The woman looked over the crowd. She saw that Claggett spoke the truth. She knew the crowd were bent on hanging some one, that even she could not control that mad element, unless she confessed her secret, a secret she had hoped to have kept locked up within her breast.

But, she would not allow the negro to be sacrificed, and was about to speak, when a man called out:

"She must tell, for she knows the murderer, and we know that she should be shown no mercy, for she has slain two men within the past twenty-four hours."

The words created a wild excitement. Every eye was turned upon the speaker.

It was Brace Barnes. By his side were his two comrades, the remnant of the five who had visited Kid Glove Kate at her home.

She saw them, too, and fixed her eyes for a moment upon Brace Barnes, and he quailed under the look.

Then, with a defiant smile, she glanced over the crowd, and said, while every word she uttered was distinctly heard:

"Pards, I am not the one, woman though I be, to allow another to suffer in my stead. I have told you only the truth in saying that the Black Butcher did not kill Hal Burton; nor did he rob him; nor does he, as far as I know, know

what has become of Nat Burton. But, I know, and I will tell you."

The crowd was silent, save for the suppressed breathing of the excited men.

Again looking coolly over the sea of faces before her, for all Dark Days Camp had gathered there about the Golden Gate Inn, she said, in the same clear and decided voice:

"Men, it was I that killed Hal Burton!"

A roar went up at this confession.

The day before, and the day before that, she had been to Dark Days Camp and had said nothing about it.

She had on the day of the funeral of Hal Burton appeared, taken her place at the head of the procession, gone to the grave, recited the service of the dead over the body, sung in a manner that had touched every heart, and yet held the secret locked in her inmost breast that she had killed the man she so touchingly had consigned to his last resting place.

What did it mean?

CHAPTER LXII.

A MAD CROWD.

"What did it mean?"

The query went from lip to lip.

The crowd was silent, save for the momentous question.

The crowd had an expression that looked ugly.

The woman read the faces of the crowd, but she did not show the slightest sign of fear.

Turning to the negro, she took her knife from her belt and severed his bonds.

"Hold on there!"

It came with a roar from the crowd.

Kid Glove Kate again faced them, and said, calmly:

"Don't let your thirst for blood make you unreasonable. The Black Butcher is not guilty—I am."

"He knew about it. Hold him, too," cried a voice.

It was Brace Barnes.

What he said, however, seemed to meet with approval.

"Hold the negro!"

"No!" and the woman spoke in a way not to be misunderstood.

"I am here in his stead."

"What had he to do with it?"

"No more than that he came upon the scene as Hal Burton was shot by me, and he would not tell what he did know."

"Certainly the manhood in you should appeal sufficiently to spare him, when he would have been hanged rather than betray me."

Wild murmurs were going the round, and then came a voice:

"Put her on trial, Dave Clagett. Your jury is still there, and you are the judge. The woman says she killed Burton, and the negro who witnessed it is here."

"Then, too, there are two other dead witnesses here against her. So, put her on trial, I say!"

The speaker's every word was heard, and the cheer that greeted what he said showed that he had caught the popular will and solved the problem.

The man was Brace Barnes. He had felt the pulse of the mad crowd and saw his chance for revenge.

"I am content. Put me on trial, and hang me, if so you will."

"If you do not do that, let me go, for I have demands upon me you know not of," said Kid Glove Kate.

"Try her! try her!" yelled the crowd.

The woman did not flinch. She took her stand before the jury, for she had slipped from her saddle and gone upon the piazza when she cut the negro's bonds.

"Silence!" called out Clagett, and he was promptly obeyed.

"Kid Glove Kate, you have come here and confessed yourself the murderer of Hal Burton," began Dave Clagett.

"It is false! I am no self-confessed murderer. I said that I had killed him."

"Ah! We give you the benefit of the doubt, Kid Glove Kate, and would hear your story."

"If it were not to free that negro, I would make no explanation under force; but as it is, I will."

"Don't mind me, missy."

"I kin stand it if you can," said the Black Butcher.

"No! Not a shadow of blame is upon you, and so I will tell my story, but in my own way."

"I shall refuse to answer questions I deem best not to answer, and will tell only what I consider ought to be known."

"You must not be the judge, for the jury and myself will decide that," said Landlord Clagett.

He knew that he had to cater to the crowd, though his sympathy was with the woman, and he meant to save her, if in his power.

"You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink, I have heard," answered Kid Glove Kate, a grim smile upon her face.

"Sit down, Kid Glove Kate," said Clagett, not unkindly.

"I prefer to stand."

"Make her give up her weapons!" shouted Brace Barnes.

"I will kill the coward that attempts to disarm me," was the quick retort, and the crowd shouted for Brace Barnes to take them.

But, he did not obey the command, and a laugh followed at his expense.

But the woman kept her weapons, as Clagett said:

"She is innocent until proven guilty; remember that, men. Let her keep her weapons."

There was but one dissenting voice, for no man cared to be ordered to disarm her. That one was Brace Barnes, who exclaimed:

"She'll kill some man yet before this affair is over."

"See to it, Brace Barnes, that you be not the man," was Kid Glove Kate's quick retort.

Then, turning to her self-appointed judge and jurors, she began her story, in a distinct voice that all could hear.

CHAPTER LXIII.

BROUGHT TO BOOK.

Looking calmly over the faces turned up to her, Kid Glove Kate said:

"It was the night of the visit of Captain Rainbow, the outlaw, to the Friendly Glass Saloon, and followed soon after by the Four Dread Shot army men."

"I had started for my home, and, reaching the timber, which to pass through at night, as many of you know, is dense darkness, when I was halted by a voice."

"Of course, I could not see who it was, but I felt that I was being held up, and I resented it. Who it was I could not even surmise; I only realized that in that dense darkness, in the trail leading to my own home, I was held up by an unknown man."

"I often had been warned of going and coming that trail at night alone, and even by day, as I usually had large sums of money with me, and I was given to understand that all the men in Dark Days Camps were not honest."

"But I felt confident that I could take care of myself, and I proved it."

"My life was threatened, not because I would not give up my gold, but because I would make no pledges."

"What pledges were you asked to make, Kid Glove Kate?" called out Brace Barnes, who now stood upon the piazza.

"You are neither Judge nor jury in this trial," was the answer.

"Answer!" shouted the crowd.

"I must ask the question, Kid Glove Kate," said Dave Clagett.

"I refuse to answer."

This refusal was jotted down by Clagett

to appease the crowd, and she was told to continue her story, which she did:

"Believing my life in danger, I fired at random in the darkness, and the one who appeared fell."

Her face grew livid for an instant, and her voice quivered, but she mastered her emotion and continued:

"I rode on, and met the Black Butcher. It was he who came to my aid, who went to the body of Hal Burton, and taking his valuables, brought them to me later, when he returned from the trail he had started upon when he so timely met me."

"Was Hal Burton alone?" asked Clagett.

"I saw no one else at the time," was her guarded reply.

"And his brother, Nat Burton?"

"I told you that what I had to tell was of Hal Burton," came another evasive response.

"And you say that you shot Burton because he held you up on the trail, and you did not know who he was at the time you fired?"

"That is what I said."

"You fired at random?"

"Yes, in the darkness, yet with the hope of killing."

"Have you the things taken from Hal Burton's body?"

"I have."

"Have you no more to tell?"

"Nothing."

"Do you believe that Hal Burton meant to rob you?"

"No; oh no!"

"But he demanded of you a pledge?"

"Yes."

"You refused to make that pledge known just now—do you still refuse?"

"Most certainly."

"And of Nat Burton what have you to say?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Do you know whether he is alive or dead?"

"He is alive."

"Where is he?"

"Of Nat Burton I have nothing to say. What I have told was to protect the Black Butcher from those who sought to hang an innocent man."

"Have you no more to tell?"

"Not a word."

The Judge and jury consulted, and then Clagett said, with evident regret:

"It is decided that you must tell all that you know, Kid Glove Kate, of this sad affair, for you have killed the most popular man in the camps, and surely know the fate of his brother, who is scarcely less popular. You must tell all you know."

"I will not!"

"Then listen to what I have to tell!" now yelled Barnes.

At once the crowd was silent, and he continued:

"I went with my pards to her cabin to arrest her, for we felt that she was Burton's murderess. She fired upon us, killing two of our pards, and so she is a double-dyed murderess; so now, I tell you, she shall tell all, or hang for it!"

He suddenly sprang toward her, to catch her off her guard, and before she could draw a weapon, to seize her.

But she was too quick for him, and her revolver flashed almost in his face, dropping him dead at her feet!

"Hang her! Hang her!" shrieked the now blood-maddened crowd, and there surged toward her men who would show no mercy even to a beautiful woman.

But, suddenly, out of the door of the Golden Gate Inn sprang four men, a drawn revolver in each hand, and they placed themselves before Kid Glove Kate, while in a low voice came the command:

"Stand back all! This woman is under our protection!"

The four men were the Dread Shot Tramps.

The one who gave the command was Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE DESERTER'S STORY.

The maddened men of Dark Days Camp stopped in their rush upon the woman as though they had run against a stone wall.

They saw the fall of Brace Barnes under Kid Glove Kate's unerring aim, they had heard him charge that she had killed two of his men, they had heard her confess to the killing of Hal Burton, had heard her refusal to tell more; and, drunk with liquor and rage, combined they intended to force from her lips all that she could tell, or to hang her.

But, the sudden appearance of the four Dread Shots, who had ridden up in the rear, had heard what was going on, and had taken the desperately bold stand they had, at once brought the maddened mass of humanity to a halt.

In that moment of their halt a slender form glided up to their side, and stood with revolvers drawn, while Kid Glove Kate, refusing to be sheltered by the Dread Shots, had her weapons in hand, and faced the crowd.

Dave Claggett was a wise man, and the men on the jury were likewise blessed with wisdom, and they at once stepped to the support of the Dread Shots.

Nor was this all, for the Black Butcher had grasped the revolvers from the body of Brace Barnes, and he, too, faced the wild crowd by the side of the Army Invincibles, while Tom Talbot and his four comrades rushed up to their support.

Thus it was two dozen men with drawn guns facing the crowd and defying them, as the words of Surgeon Powell plainly showed, for he called out:

"Come on you miserable cowards, if you wish to strike at a woman defended by men of the United States Army and these brave fellows who support us!"

Not a word was said, only a low murmur running through the crowd.

"For shame, men, to attempt a woman's life! Back, all of you, and show that it was but a momentary madness, and that true hearts still beat in your breasts—that you are not the cowards your act implied."

The words of Surgeon Powell caught them. They gave them a chance to retract and retreat.

One man cried out: "Pards, that Dread Shot officer and his pards saved us from everlasting disgrace. Three cheers for them, boys!"

The three cheers were given with a roar.

The victory had been won; Dread Shot Trumps had trumped the other's winning hand! The mass of men were wildly excited, but they were no longer dangerous.

As the Dread Shots turned to accept the congratulations of the landlord and his jury, of Tom Talbot, and others, Kid Glove Kate slipped into the inn unseen, and, her horse being brought around to the rear by the negro, she mounted and dashed away, after a few earnest words to the Black Butcher.

The latter at once sought his horse, went to the store, made some purchases, and, taking these with him, rode off on the trail Kid Glove Kate had taken.

When the woman was sought for she could not be found; nor could the Black Butcher. And more; when Wild Bill asked for the one who had also come to their aid, he was told that he had gone to a room in the hotel and wished to see the Dread Shot Scouts when they could come there.

"We will go at once, Bill, for I believe that was our escaped deserter."

"You remember that Rainbow's letter confessed doubt of him, and he did mark the trail for us, while he certainly came to our aid a few minutes ago, when chances looked desperate against us," urged Surgeon Powell.

So they went to the rear wing, where the one who had supported them awaited their coming.

In spite of his disguise they knew him, and he said, promptly:

"Gentlemen, the time has come when I must make a confession, and to win your confidence I do so, for I have most important information to impart."

"You all look upon me as a deserter, and I am, to all appearances, one, yet not in reality, as I will explain."

"Any man who enlists in the service of the United States and then leaves it without an honorable discharge is a deserter," remarked Surgeon Powell, sternly.

"I well know that, sir; but I never enlisted!"

"I will tell you that I have a twin sister who is my counterpart in size, looks, and bearing."

"She loved not wisely but too well, for she fell in love with a man professing to be an officer of the army."

"He was a private soldier on leave; he married her, and then he disappeared."

"In her sorrow at her misfortune, and her hatred of the man, she took a bold plan to catch him, for, robed as a man, she enlisted in the army!"

"I was on her track, found what she had done, and by entreaties, got her to allow me to take her place and find the man."

"I did so, no one knowing the difference. And more; I found my man in Sergeant Samuel Carr, and when he deserted I went with him, to in the end avenge my sister."

"I was keeping with him and biding my time, and he, knowing me as the brother of the girl he had wronged, did not think that I knew the story, for I was at sea when he came to our home."

"I left with him, as did those other two men, but it was Carr who killed the two soldiers who pursued."

"You avenged them, Surgeon Powell, for when you killed Sergeant Carr you avenged my sister also."

"Then, realizing that I would be arrested as a deserter, and for murder, I was crushed with grief; but later, I rallied, and made my escape, as you know."

"I found the outlaws, went with them to their retreat, marked the trail, for I supposed you would follow with soldiers, and it very nearly cost me my life."

"But I know the retreat, the numbers of outlaws, and all; and more: Captain Rainbow sent a messenger ahead of me to one Loafer Dick, his spy here, but, as yet, I have not seen either the messenger or the spy."

"We can account for the messenger," and Surgeon Powell told how he had fallen by Night Hawk George's hand and that they had the letter.

Then the young soldier went on to say: "I was then sent here, and the chief followed me in the disguise of an old trapper. He should soon be here, and when he and his spy are together will be the time to catch them."

"And we will, and the capture of the stronghold will follow, for with you, that negro, and a dozen more good men, we can surprise and carry their retreat," said Surgeon Powell.

CHAPTER LXV.

TWO STRANGE STORIES.

It did not take the Four Dread Shots and Alfred Aldrich—no longer known as a deserter—long to arrange for the capture of Captain Rainbow and Loafer Dick.

The scouts were much impressed with the story of the young man, and no longer looked upon him as a deserter, when he had never really enlisted.

Asked about his sister, they were told that she was then living upon a ranch in Texas, awaiting news from him that she was avenged, for the man she had loved she knew had a wife living whom he had also cruelly deceived.

It was decided that the young man should go out and find the chief when he came into the camps, and also keep his eye upon Loafer Dick, and make his report, so that they could be arrested that night in the Friendly Glass Saloon, or in the Golden Gate Inn, perhaps at

the home of the spy, did the disguised outlaw chief go there.

This being decided upon, Surgeon Powell left the room, as Landlord Dave Claggett had been calling him.

"The Black Butcher has just come, sir, and says that Kid Glove Kate asks if you will return with him at once to her cabin?"

"I will go at once, landlord," and, mounting his horse, the Surgeon Scout rode off with the negro on the trail to Kid Glove Kate's lone cabin.

While on the way Surgeon Powell said:

"We have to thank you, my man, for a warning you gave us, and good services afterward rendered when the outlaws had some of our party corralled."

"I didn't wish to see you downed, sir, and I have been keeping a eye on them outlaws for some time."

"How did you happen to come up here, and alone?"

"I don't mind telling you, sah, now I has done ther work I come fer. Yer see, I was raised in the family of a Mississippi planter, and I was a slave, like my people before me. I went through the war with my young master, sir, and after the surrender he, having lost all, moved to Texas, and went to ranching, and my old daddy and mammy and myself went with him and his family."

"Them was bad times, sir, on the border, and one night some robbers came and kilt young master, his wife, and little boy, and my old daddy and mammy, too. I was wounded, but escaped."

"The reason I came up here, sir, was because I tracked them robbers here, and every man I has kilt has been one of that band, and they calls me the Black Butcher fer it, but they don't know the reason."

"But, I has struck it rich, sir, out here, and I has got a good, big fortune, so I will go back to Mississippi, where some of my people is, and marry some pretty yaller gal, and live happy, for they won't know what I has been through."

"Now, sir, there is ther cabin, and I knows that pretty missy has had heaps of trouble, though she don't tell nobody."

"She asked me to git her some supplies, and when I fetched them, she sent back after you, for she's got a wounded man thar for you to see, sir."

Greatly moved by the story of the Black Avenger, Surgeon Powell dismounted at the cabin, and was met by Kid Glove Kate.

She greeted him warmly, thanked him for saving her from the crowd, and then said:

"Doctor, I sent for you to see a wounded man. I did not think he was seriously wounded, but fever set in, delirium followed, and you must save him, for I have heard of your wonderful powers as a surgeon and a physician."

"I will do all in my power, Kid Glove Kate, for so they call you, and, fortunately, I have my surgical and medicine case with me."

Led into the inner room, Frank Powell found there Nat Burton.

He had a high fever and was delirious.

An examination showed that the wounds were not serious. They were skillfully dressed, and medicine given to allay the fever, and more to be administered at regular intervals.

The woman watched him through all he did, and as he walked to the door, saying he would come on the morrow, and remain in Dark Days Camp until her patient was recovered, she said:

"Doctor Powell, I refused to tell to that mad crowd to-day the truth of Hal Burton's death and that I had Nat Burton here. I will tell you what they could not force me to utter, especially as you have just confided to me the secret that Rainbow, the outlaw, will be in your power to-night, or dead."

"The man lying in yonder room, hovering between life and death, is my brother. That means, that in killing Hal Burton I killed my own brother!"

"It was the Black Butcher, as they call that big-hearted negro, who shot my brother, lying wounded there.

"In the dense darkness I did not know who they were.

"Poor Hal, not knowing me as his sister, as Nat told me before he became delirious, fell in love with me, and his brain was turned, for he suffered from a wound in the head, given long before.

"Nat had accompanied him to have a talk with me that night.

"He little dreamed of the result, that madness would seize upon poor Hal and he would fall by my hand. But, so it was.

"My brothers did not know me; but I knew them. I was a little girl when last they saw me. They were well off, and noble fellows, but they had a false friend who ruined them financially, and they were sent to prison for his crimes.

"They served their time in prison, and feeling their disgrace, became Wild West wanderers, until they struck it rich here and found a fortune.

"Then I came on the scene, but they did not know me as their little eight-year-old sister when they had last seen me.

"I was brought up by a distant relative, who was a gambler, a reckless, bad man. He took me to his home in New Mexico, and when I grew up he told me I was to be his wife, for his wife died shortly before very suddenly, and I loved her dearly.

"I was but sixteen when he made me his wife, and soon after I found out that he had poisoned his first wife.

"A scene followed, and, knowing of other of his crimes, I threatened to have him arrested, and he fled.

"Several years after I discovered that he was up here in the mines, and having looked over the papers he had left, I found out that he was at the bottom of the wrongs against my two splendid brothers.

"I at once determined to find him and bring him to justice, for I was well prepared for the work by the training I had had as a gambler's ward, had been raised upon a ranch, where I had learned to ride and shoot, and several times had aided in defending our frontier home against Mexican raiders and Indians.

"At last I came to Dark Days in my search, and only the night I saw you at the saloon, you and your pards, did I find the man I sought.

"His name is Roger Rainford; he has changed it to Rainbow."

There was no more to tell, and Surgeon Powell rode back to Dark Days deeply pondering over the strange happenings of the day, the strangest of all being told by Kid Glove Kate, the remarkable and beautiful Gold Gambler, who had vowed never to go with ungloved hands until she had run down Roger Rainbow, who had warped her whole nature and ruined her young life.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CONCLUSION.

Captain Rainbow found Loafer Dick, his spy, soon after his arrival in Dark Days, and, looking up the new recruit to the band of Scarlet Scouts, he was not long in discovering him, also.

Stating that he had something important to tell, Alfred Aldrich went with the chief and Loafer Dick to the cabin of the latter, and the three were engaged in earnest conversation when through door and windows pressed four rifles, and the command came:

"Hands up, or you are dead men!"

The command was obeyed, for neither Rainbow nor Loafer Dick believed that it was other than an attempt to rob them by some mine marauders, though his not finding Lute Bedford, his messenger, in camp, had worried him considerably.

When the four Dread Shots and the Black Butcher stepped into the cabin, the chief saw his mistake, and would have

drawn a weapon, but was seized by Alfred Aldrich in a grip of iron.

A moment after the chief and his spy were securely bound, and lay glaring at the young soldier, who said:

"Don't think I am a traitor, chief, for I am not, for, though I stood the tests I was put to, I did not sign your accursed oath, but took all chances, and wrote a vow to hunt you down, and it will be found among your papers."

"Yes, and much else will be found against you, Roger Rainford," added Surgeon Powell.

The outlaw uttered a cry at hearing his real name spoken, but said not a word more.

The prisoners were taken to the Golden Gate Inn, where Landlord Claggett had a band of picked men for special service, and ready to start upon a secret trail at dawn.

The news at once flew over the camps of the capture of Captain Rainbow; and Surgeon Powell spoke:

"The reward put up neither my pards nor myself will take, so it will go to the unfortunates of Dark Days, for Alfred Aldrich also refuses it, as well as our negro friend, Black Butcher, for both of them had a hand in this capture.

"But, let me say that the large sum in paper money so generously put upon his own life by Captain Rainbow was counterfeited, for the expert scoundrel has the tools for its manufacture up at his camp, as I am told."

The men of Dark Days went wild over the clever capture, but did not know until the next day that Wild Bill and his Dread Shot Pard, accompanied by Alfred Aldrich and the Black Butcher and a dozen picked men, had started for the fort with the prisoners.

The trail to the fort led by the cabin of Kid Glove Kate, and the outlaw chief was brought face to face with the woman he had so ruthlessly wronged.

The Surgeon Scout found his patient improving, and promising to soon return, he started on with the force going to the stronghold of the Scarlet Scouts.

The arrival was timed for the night, and the Scarlets were surprised just at dawn, as they came out of their cabins.

It was a short, sharp, and deadly fight, and the few renegades who survived were taken prisoners, and soon after were on their way to the fort, under guard of Wild Bill, Texas Jack, and the young soldier, who was going to clear his name of the stigma of desertion and murder.

The vast amount of booty found was left under guard of Night Hawk George and several of the volunteer miners, while the rest returned with Surgeon Powell to Dark Days, the doctor being anxious to get back to his patient, Nat Burton.

The wounded man was found much improved, his fever broken, and he had already been told by his sister the real story of her life.

"You have saved him, Doctor Powell, and we are to go back together to our old home, where my career will remain a secret to all."

"I have been like one in a strange and sinful dream for several years past, and I am going to think of all I have gone through as a dream, not the painful reality it has been, and what consolation there is left to me in life I shall take, living down the cruel bygone."

"The large sum of money I have won by gambling I shall devote wholly to charity, for brother tells me he is a rich man."

"And more: Doctor Powell, I shall devote my life to doing good, to atone for the evil which unhappy fate and not a wicked heart made me commit."

That the beautiful woman who had won the unenviable name of Kid Glove Kate, the Gold Gambler of Dark Days Camp, became the good spirit of a sweet home, the reader may be told; and, though the dead past did not wholly bury its dead, in her memory, it drifted away

as the shadow of a great sorrow, only to be recalled with a pitiful sense of the wrongs which had been the incentive to her mining-camp career.

THE END.

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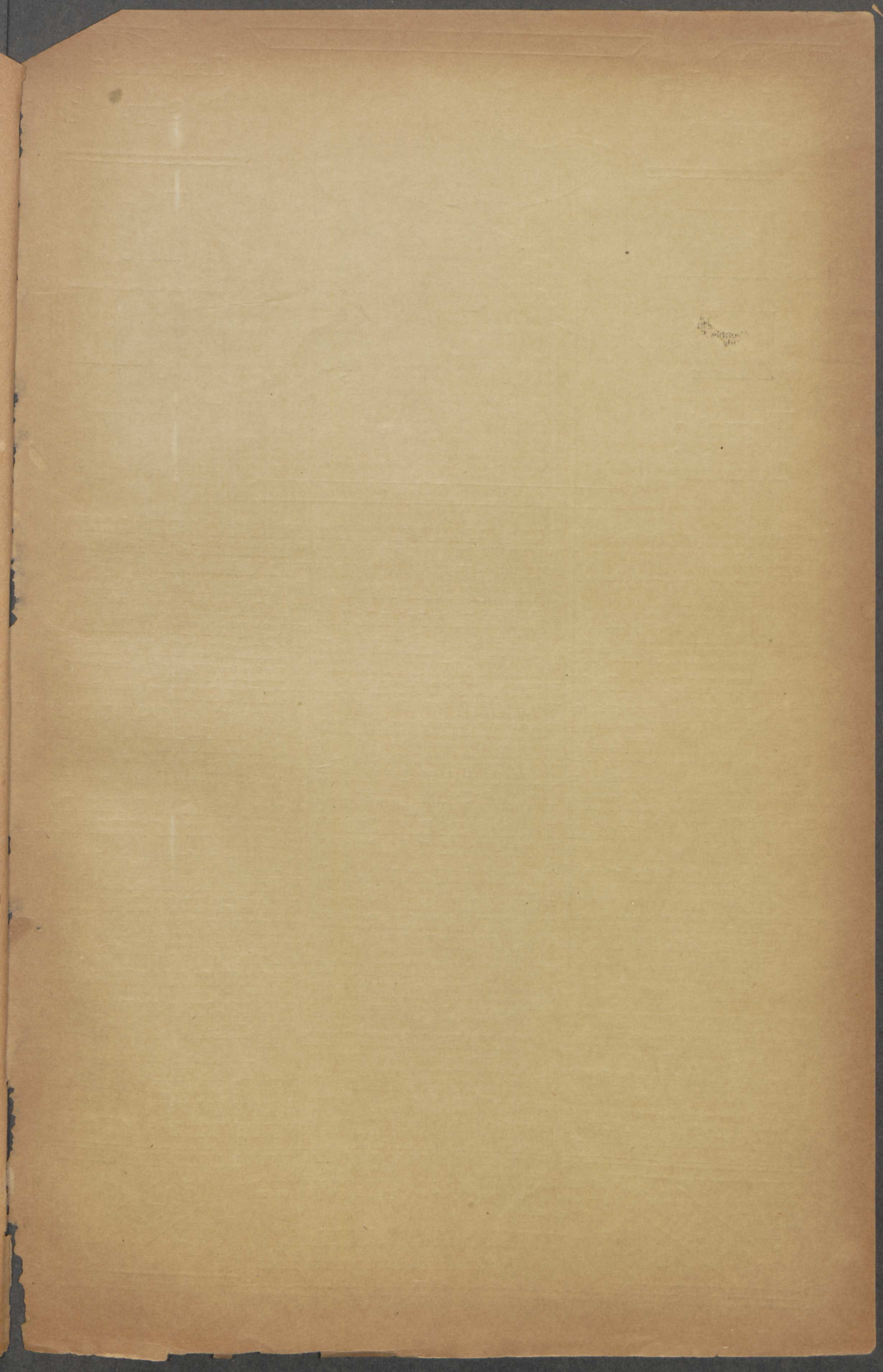
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